

Rascal DOES NOT DREAM of a Knapsack Kid

Hajime
kamoshida

Illustration by
KEJI MIZOGUCHI





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Chapter 1 March Cameras Rolling

Chapter 2 The Shape of a Bond

Chapter 3 A Dream of Happiness

Chapter 4 Home

Intermezzo A New Season



Together, they got me through this long year—
—which is now drawing to a close.

Just being with Mai makes me happy.
Having Futaba and Kunimi around gives
me strength.
With Koga and Toyohama, the laughs
never stop.
And Kaede keeps me motivated.





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New York

Copyright

Rascal Does Not Dream of a Knapsack Kid Hajime Kamoshida

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That day, Sakuta Azusagawa met a little girl.



march cameras rolling

1

What could this mean?

The waves lapped pleasantly on Shichirigahama Beach. The wind still whistled in his ears. A voice mingled with those sounds.

“Who are you, mister?”

The speaker was a girl in a red leather knapsack.

She was looking up at him warily. Not anxious, but assured.

Sakuta was far less assured. For two good reasons.

First, this girl was very familiar. She looked just like the famous child-actress Mai Sakurajima.

But even more unsettling—this was the *second* time this had happened to him.

He’d dreamed about it once before. A strange dream that had really stuck with him. And now the same events were happening in reality.

And his head was too preoccupied with this strange sense of déjà vu to figure out how to respond to the kid’s question.

He wound up saying exactly what he’d said in the dream.

“I guess I’ve got one foot in the door...”

To a girl her age, high school students did look awfully grown-up. When he was her age, he’d have called anyone in uniform “mister,” too. Just...now that he *was* in high school, he definitely didn’t feel grown-up at all. Would he ever?

“My mom said I’m not supposed to talk to strangers. Sorry!”

She bobbed her head politely and turned her back on him.

“Where’s your mom?”

He looked around, but the nearest other person was a good thirty yards away. And that was an older dude with a dog, paying them no attention, strolling along the length of the beach.

“.....”

She'd heard him but wasn't answering. Pretending not to hear.

“You alone?”

“.....”

Apparently, her mother's rule was ironclad. She'd been looking west at Enoshima, but when she turned east toward Kamakura and Hayama, he caught a glimpse of a frown.

He looked left and right himself, wondering again what was going on.

The first phrase that came to mind was *Adolescence Syndrome*.

Most of the world scoffed at the concept, dismissing it as little more than a superstition. Just some nonsense made up online. Not something anyone *really* believed.

But Sakuta had good reason to take it seriously. He had firsthand experience with people turning invisible, predicting the future, splitting into two, or swapping bodies with their sisters. He'd *lived* it.

And these experiences included one girl who was sometimes in high school and sometimes in college. Mai was in high school, but it wasn't necessarily surprising that she'd suddenly turn into an elementary school kid. Personally, he preferred the older version and hoped she'd go back to normal soon...

There was one thing that bothered him. Something his friend Rio Futaba had said.

———“*Returning to the past is really problematic.*”

He seemed to recall her saying that right around the time the petite devil's mischief began.

Sakuta hadn't really followed the logic, but if Rio said a thing, it was definitely true.

With Shouko Makinohara, she'd been known to grow up, but if the kid standing next to him was really Mai, then she'd gotten small. Which could be *very* problematic.

She must have sensed his eyes on her. The kid glanced up at him like she had something to say—but nothing came out. Nor did she move to leave. She just stood there, at a loss, waiting for him to say something.

“Are you lost?” he asked. The first thing on his mind.

She jumped. Clearly, he’d guessed right.

“No!” she insisted, glaring at him. That same grumpy look modern Mai often gave him.

And that made him break out in a smile.

“Where is this?” she asked, like she was rebuking that grin.

“I thought you couldn’t talk to strangers.”

“.....Fine, then.”

Even grumpier. She turned her back on him again and started walking toward Enoshima.

“You’re on Shichirigahama,” he called after her.

She stopped.

He waited till she turned back, then added, “But actually, it isn’t even *one ri*.”

“.....”

Still no reaction. She just kept looking right at him, without so much as a word.

“I go to school here. Minegahara High. Name’s Sakuta Azusagawa.”

He pointed up at the school building, belatedly introducing himself.

“Now I’m not a stranger, right?”

She blinked, eyes wide...but surprise soon gave way to a smile.

A peal of happy, childish laughter echoed across the sky.

The sound of good health and good times.

The sort of laugh that made you feel glad to be alive.

But the clouds hanging over Sakuta’s heart remained. No rays of light hit his

face.

The reason was all too clear.

He had no idea who this girl could be.

When she stopped laughing, he asked, “What’s your name?”

Getting right to the point. Her lips pursed, and she blinked up at him.

“You don’t know me?”

“That’s why I’m asking.”

“I’m—,” she began.

“Sakuta.”

A voice behind him, calling his name.

A voice he’d know anywhere and could never get enough of.

“.....?!”

Surprised, he swung around. He found Mai standing ten yards off, in her Minegahara school uniform. Five foot five, a little tall for a girl. She had one hand up, shielding her hair from the wind, and the other holding a cardboard tube with her diploma inside. This was Mai as he’d always known her. She picked her way across the sand toward him.

When he said nothing, she raised an eyebrow.

“Surprised to see me?” she teased.

“Mai...?” An obvious question, but he asked anyway.

“I did not leave you waiting here so long you forgot me.”

She was now close enough to reach out and flick his forehead. Her voice, her gestures, the tone she used to tease him—no doubt about it. This was *his* Mai.

“You really are her!”

“Who else would I be?!”

“But a second ago, I was talking to a mini Mai.”

“A what?” She blinked at him, baffled.

“Look, she’s right over—”

He turned back to the knapsack kid.

“.....Huh.”

There was no sign of her. He looked left, then right, then did a 360-turn, scanning the entire beach. Nothing.

Tiny footprints were still there in the sand. They stopped where she’d been standing, right next to him. No tracks leading away.

Like she’d vanished into thin air.

“Well, damn...”

“Sakuta?”

“Mai, when you came up, did you see a little girl in a red knapsack?”

When he turned around, she’d been a good ten yards off. She’d had a full view.

But he had a feeling he wouldn’t get the answer he was looking for. Her confusion made that pretty clear. They’d been on different pages since she arrived. But he had to be sure.

“I didn’t, no,” she said, perplexed.

Yep. That was the last thing he wanted to hear.

“You’re sure?”

“You were alone from the time I reached the beach until the moment I spoke to you.”

No wiggle room. She was being as detailed as possible. And telling the truth as she saw it. No need to obfuscate anything.

“What’s going on?” she asked, frowning at him.

“Like I said, I was here waiting for you, and a kid came running up who looked just like you did, back in your child-actress years. Like yea tall.”

He held out a hand just above his waist.

“You’re sure it was me?”

“Well, as sure as I can be.”

It wasn't like he remembered *exactly* what she'd looked like back then.

“But she vanished when you got here.”

They'd exchanged a handful of words. She sure hadn't seemed like an illusion.

He scanned the beach again. So did Mai. No little knapsack kids anywhere.

“Is this Adolescence Syndrome?” Mai asked.

Sakuta glanced back at her. He moved close enough to touch, looking her right in the eye.

“Wh-what?”

“Are you doing all right, Mai? Is something wrong?”

He put his hands on the shoulders of her uniform, feeling her under his palms. He slid them down her arms to her elbows, as if tracing her outline—and then there was a sharp pain in his foot.

“Ow, ow! Mai, that hurt!”

She ground her heel harder.

“Don't stroke people's arms without warning!” she snapped, brushing his hands away.

“Should I have made it a grope? Owwww!”

More grinding.

“I'm just dandy,” she said. “Nothing out of the ordinary here.”

Like she had no idea why he'd be worried at all.

“I could ask you the same thing,” she added, shooting him a look of concern.

“Well, my foot hurts.”

“I mean it.”

She moved her foot but pinched his cheek instead.

“I've got nothing going on that could kickstart Adolescence Syndrome, either. Other than exam stress and fatigue, I guess.”

He gave her a sidelong glance, being very obvious.

“So you’re blaming me?”

“I would never! Here I am, trying to get into the same school as you—for you! And I just thought that maybe deserved a reward.”

“College is for *you*, Sakuta,” Mai sighed.

Then, acting like he’d left her *no* choice, she handed him her cell phone. It was already in camera mode. With the sea behind them, she put her shoulder to his.

Was that a prompt for a selfie?

“To mark the occasion.”

“All right, then,” he said, and he held his arm out, getting them both in the frame—and Enoshima, in the far corner. “Say *cheese*!”

But just as he pushed the shutter, he felt something soft on his cheek. A sweet scent wafted over. An instant later, he heard the click of the camera.

Then it was over, and Mai snatched the phone away. She pulled up the photo, mirth in her eyes. There was no mistaking that glee of a successful prank.

He leaned over her shoulder and saw his own face looking startled by the kiss on his cheek. He looked magnificently dumb. And he didn’t mind at all. The way Mai blushed slightly was too adorable for anything else to matter.

“Wipe that smirk off your face.”

“If this photo ever gets out, the media will lose their minds.”

“Should I delete it now?” Mai asked, moving away from the surf.

“Print it out first and give me a copy,” Sakuta said, catching up.

“Never.”

“Aww.”

“You’d put it on your wall.”

“So?”

“If Kaede saw it, I’d be mortified.”

“Would you now?”

“Absolutely.”

Her tone suggested that was the end of that topic. But as they reached the stairs leading up from the beach, she took his hand. Almost. She was only holding on to his ring finger and pinkie.

They started climbing.

“That reminds me, Sakuta.”

“Mm?”

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Who, and when?”

“Now.”

She ignored the other question.

The light turned green just as they reached the top. The walk lights on Route 134 infamously stayed red forever, so Sakuta moved to cross—but Mai stopped him. “This way,” she said, pulling him to the right. Toward a parking lot with a view of the ocean.

In summer, beachgoers kept this lot full, but it was March 1, and the lingering winter chill left it virtually deserted.

There were only a couple cars here and there.

Someone stood next to a navy-blue hybrid. She wore a dark jacket and a tight skirt that came below the knees. Definitely a formal look, almost a suit. Like a mother would wear to her daughter’s graduation. Which was exactly what she was.

As Sakuta and Mai approached, she spotted them. Her eyes locked on Sakuta. He was instantly nervous.

He’d seen the lady in the parking lot before.

Mai’s mother crossed her arms, waiting.

A steely glint lit up her eyes.

He'd been given no time to prepare. Completely blindsided.

He'd been told she was asking to meet him, but he would much rather have known in advance that was happening *today*. Knowing Mai, she had likely withheld that information on purpose.

She clearly had no intention of releasing his hand, and she pulled him gently over to her mother.

And he saw her mother's eyes glance down, taking note of *that*.

"This is my boyfriend, Sakuta Azusagawa," Mai said. Then she turned to him. "This is my—"

"I'm her mother."

"Sakuta Azusagawa. I assure you we're keeping things very chaste."

He bowed his head.

"I'm aware. I had my people look into it when the media circus started."

Her tone was perfectly pleasant, but the content was mildly alarming. What exactly had "her people" investigated? Weirdly, he found himself not minding much—it was exactly how Mai Sakurajima's mother *should* act. He would have found it weirder if she *hadn't* looked into him. Any celebrity mom would— "My daughter put you through quite a lot."

"Mm?"

This, however, caught him off guard. Enough that he let it show. She didn't bat an eye. Either she wasn't that interested in him, or she was deliberately ignoring his reaction—her expression never changed, and he couldn't get a read on which.

"You haven't had any reporters sniffing around you? Nobody taking pictures?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Maybe someone had taken some photos without his noticing, but he couldn't speak to that.

"Good," she said, with a hint of relief. She glanced at her watch. "I'd better

go.”

Without waiting for Mai’s answer, she opened the car door and sat down.

Before she closed the door, she looked up at Mai.

“If you take after me, you’re no judge of men. Don’t you let him cheat on you.”

Of all the things to say. Sakuta had no idea how to respond.

“Not a concern,” Mai said, not even meeting her mother’s gaze.

“You’re very confident.”

“I picked him carefully.”

She’d certainly spent a full month testing him after he asked her out.

“And I’ve got him well trained.”

Mai’s eyes glanced his way. He considered barking, but the look in her eyes was warning him not to do anything stupid, so he held his tongue. Best way to prove he was trained was to not embarrass her here.

“You say that, but I bet you’re using work as an excuse to leave him to his own devices.”

This lady knew her daughter well.

“Well...” Mai flinched. But she soon recovered. “I make a point of calling regularly when I’m on location.”

Her mother was having none of that. Her gaze turned back to Sakuta.

“Can I call you Sakuta?”

“Uh, please.”

“She’s a handful, but try to treat her right.”

“Um.”

Once more, not at all what he’d anticipated. He’d imagined she’d be against their relationship on principle, and he didn’t know what to say.

“I’ll do my best?” he managed, but she’d already shut the door, put her seat

belt on, and started the engine, so she likely didn't even hear it.

She switched her blinker on and pulled away, the hybrid engine barely a whisper.

2

Once Mai's mom's car was out of sight, they started walking. Back to the light at Route 134. Naturally, it showed no signs of turning green anytime soon.

It felt like a full two minutes before they finally crossed. And two minutes was all it took to reach Shichirigahama Station, where they boarded a train from Kamakura, bound for Fujisawa.

A four-car train with a retro-styled green-and-cream exterior.

It was a Sunday, so the train was packed with college groups and young couples. There was barely any room to stand.

Mai had graduated from Minegahara High earlier that day, so this was her final ride home from school. She seemed disinclined to savor the moment, but the way she gazed at the ocean through the windows made it clear she didn't care how packed the train was.

Sakuta and Mai barely spoke on the fifteen-minute ride to the end of the line, Fujisawa Station.

As they stepped off, Mai said, "That was the last time." A bit wistfully. She'd ridden that train daily for three whole years. And she could always ride it again if she chose to. As long as she lived in Fujisawa, it was easy enough. But she would likely never ride it as frequently as she had been.

That was part of the whole graduation thing.

Some things changed without you knowing it, and others didn't but felt like they did. It all came down to how you perceived it.

"I'd better feast my eyes on you in uniform while I still can."

"You're not that into school uniforms, though."

"What matters is what's inside."

But if this really was the last time, that did feel like a shame.

“You can ask, but I’m never putting it on for you.”

“If I’m asking, it’ll be the bunny-girl outfit.”

As they chatted, they followed the flood of people out of the gates and across the bridge to the JR station.

Kamakura lay to the east of Fujisawa and Chigasaki to the west. That meant Fujisawa Station housed not only the Enoden, but the Tokaido Line and the Odakyu Enoshima Line. A substantial portion of this crowd was here changing lines.

Sakuta and Mai came in the JR Fujisawa Station’s southern doors and went right past the gates and out the north side. They walked through the electronic store to the supermarket.

Sakuta pushed the cart around, following Mai’s lead. She picked up ingredients and dropped them into the cart. The good beef, sausage, fresh veggies, and a range of seafood—tuna, salmon, squid, and octopus.

“Whatcha making, Mai?”

In honor of her graduation, they were eating at his place.

“Still a secret,” she said, with a hint of glee. Their shopping date was a delight.

Once they’d paid, he carried the bulk of the bags, and they made their way home.

The farther from the station they got, the less foot traffic there was. The big-box stores gave way to mom-and-pop shops, and then those gave way to residential buildings.

“Oh, right. Mai,” Sakuta began.

“Yes?”

He’d been trying to work up the courage to ask.

“When’d you make up with your mom?”

From what he knew, this was not a rift that could be easily healed. Mai did not even like *talking* about her mother.

So he'd been surprised the lady showed up for her graduation. Surprised Mai had allowed her to attend.

"I didn't."

Mai kept her eyes forward and her tone uninterested.

"Mm?"

He was lost.

"I didn't make up with her."

Even more lost.

"But she came to your graduation?"

"I didn't ask her to."

She was getting slightly annoyed. It was like this every time. Mai's hackles went up at the very mention of her mom.

"Then why?" he asked, turning to look at her.

Mai noticed and briefly glanced his way, then dodged his gaze. When he kept staring, she sighed and begrudgingly explained, "I went to Kyoto for that shoot last month."

"Yeah."

Mid-February. It was what forced them to spend their first Valentine's Day apart. He remembered *not* getting chocolate very well.

"There was a child actress there, from *her* agency."

Still not calling her Mom.

"So your mom came to Kyoto with the kid?" he surmised.

Mai nodded wordlessly.

"Said the girl was a fan of mine. Brought her to my dressing room."

Her lips pursed, irritated. She was reliving the emotions of that moment.

"I couldn't fight with her in front of a kid...then she got the graduation date out of me."

“And that’s why she showed up?”

“Yeah. Although, honestly, I assumed she’d be too busy to make it. That sure backfired,” Mai added, half smiling.

He’d never seen *that* look on her face when talking about her mother before. Despite her protests, she was clearly a bit more at ease—enough to laugh at her own failings.

Which made Sakuta want to pry further.

“Do you still have it in for her, Mai?”

“Absolutely,” she snapped. Didn’t have to think about it, didn’t hesitate at all. But it didn’t seem like she was being stubborn or sticking to her guns, just saying how she felt in so many words. Still, her anger felt a lot more...subdued.

“That photo album in junior high—I *said* I wasn’t doing any swimsuits, but she booked the shoot anyway. I’m not letting her off the hook for that, ever.”

To Mai, that was a simple statement of fact. Not easily forgiven. Time did not heal this wound, nor did it make that woman any less Mai’s mom. And *because* she was Mai’s mom, that pain wouldn’t fade so soon. It was that kind of wound.

“Just...a lot happened in the last year.”

Mai glanced at him then. A hint of warmth in her gaze. Sakuta felt like he knew what she meant. But he wanted her to say it, in her own words. He was no actor, but he did his best to pretend like he didn’t understand.

She saw through the act right away but let him win.

“My bout of Adolescence Syndrome, meeting you...and Shouko. She sure put us through a lot, but the upshot is that I figured out what really matters.”

Her voice got real quiet toward the end, but he heard it all. She meant these words for his ears alone.

“My gripe with her didn’t *go away*. But I have more things that matter. And surrounded by all that...well, it just feels less real, the emotions less intense. Mm, that sounds right.”

Mai struggled a little looking for the right words, but by the end, she’d clearly

found them. It all made sense to him, and what she'd said helped him figure something out himself.

Emotions don't exist in isolation. One good thing can make you not care so much about whatever you've been hung up on. No matter how much something rankles, it only takes one blessing to make forgiveness possible. Like Mai said, other things were important to her now.

Mai might not have realized it, but this was an admission that her vendetta against her mother *also* mattered. And for a while, it had been all that mattered.

"Also..." she began, then cut herself short.

"Yes?" he said, looking at her.

She gave him a long look as she thought it over.

"The little girl I met in Kyoto? She was just like me."

"How so?"

"Her father left home a few years back, leaving her and her mother. And I wound up talking to the kid's mother a bit on break..."

"And?"

"She said, 'Without a father, we're not exactly a standard family. And I act like she's special so she doesn't ever feel like she's worse off because of that.'"

"Huh."

He wasn't really sure how to take that.

"She also said I was their role model, the one they admired most, and...that sure shut me up."

Mai Sakurajima's grasp on the "number one actress you wish were your daughter" throne had lasted *years*. Especially for any families in the child-actress game—for stage moms, Mai was the ultimate success story. She was *special*. And he got why a mom would want their kid to be that kind of special. Doting on your kids was just what parents did.

"After hearing their stories and watching the kid try to meet her mother's

expectations...well, I just didn't have it in me to criticize her mother. They seemed so close, really working together to achieve their goals."

"Were you like that, once?"

"....."

She neither confirmed nor denied.

"I don't really remember," she said at length. "I was just so busy. My head spinning, constantly dizzy... Every day, I was memorizing lines, rehearsing, filming, being driven from place to place, then having her help me prep for the next day's work. Day after day. Sleeping in the car on the way, naps in the dressing room on breaks, weeks on end in hotels, never seeing our own home..."

"And she was there with you every step of the way? Your mom's something else."

Mai could sleep in the car, but her mother was obviously driving. When had she slept? Mai could nap in the break room, but her mother was there as her manager and couldn't exactly just lie down and close her eyes.

But voicing this opinion earned him a glare.

"Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, of course."

"Fine. We're done talking about this."

She picked up the pace, going on ahead. He scrambled to keep up.

Not looking at him, she added, "I didn't think I was ready to get it."

"Get what?"

"Why a mother would want her daughter to be special."

Apparently, Mai was only "done" talking about her relationship with her own mother; the topic at large was still going strong.

"My father said I'd figure out how parents feel when I had kids myself," Sakuta said.

And he'd probably meant it wasn't possible until that happened.

"Maybe he's right. But back to the point—I still hate *her*. But for the sake of the future...I'd also like to try to fix that."

"What future is this?"

"If I'm gonna have a family of my own, I need to know how to *be* a family," Mai said, blushing a bit.

"In my mind, you'll be the best wife ever, so I'm pretty sure we're gonna be just fine."

"Let's hope."

"Oh? Not even scolding me for picturing us as newlyweds?"

"I'm saving that for if you imagine yourself with anyone *else*."

She took a few dance-like steps and spun around to face him. They'd reached the street between their respective buildings.

"Mai."

"Yes?"

"Can you hold these for a second?"

He hefted the grocery bags.

"But we're home?"

"I want to give you a hug, but I can't with my hands full."

This was a natural impulse after seeing something that adorable. Mai had only herself to blame.

"I don't want anyone snapping pics for the tabloids."

She did an about-face and waved the diploma tube over her shoulder.

"I'll be over around four."

With that, she passed through the doors to her building. She was soon out of sight.

No use standing around in the street alone. Sakuta went inside the building

opposite, checked the empty mailbox, and took the elevator to the fifth floor.

He unlocked the door and stepped in.

“I’m home!” he called, moving to the living room.

Kaede was at the *kotatsu* with her laptop open. She looked up and said hi.

He put the grocery bags in the kitchen and headed to his room to change.

He dropped his backpack on the bed and took off his uniform. Blazer, trousers, white shirt. He’d had a T-shirt under that, and he removed it and his socks, leaving him in just his underwear.

He turned to the closet to grab some sweats and caught a glimpse of himself in the window—and that was when he noticed something wasn’t right.

“.....?”

Something that shouldn’t be there.

And he wasn’t imagining it.

He turned to face the window glass.

There he was, resplendent in his undies. With a scar across his stomach, like a crack in the pavement. A single claw mark that ran across his right side to his belly button. White and puffy, the scab already gone.

“What the...?”

But no one could answer this question.

He looked down, and the scar was very clearly real.

3

Good on her word, Mai rang the intercom at exactly four.

“That’s Mai, right? I can answer?”

Before Sakuta could say no, Kaede had hit the button. She went to the door all on her own and brought Mai back to the living room. He should probably have been pleased his infamously shy sister was opening up, but it just felt like she was stealing his job.

“Mai, it’s so cool you graduated!”

“Thank you, Kaede.”

Kaede was still a little tense, so Mai was being extra nice.

Mai had a large tote bag with her, far too large for someone who was just coming over for dinner.

“Sleeping over?” he asked, figuring a man could dream, and saying it might make it come true.

“Don’t be silly,” she scoffed.

“I think it’s high time that stopped sounding silly.”

They’d started dating last summer. Two full seasons had passed, and spring was almost here. More than six whole months!

“Shh, Kaede’s listening,” she scolded.

“Exactly, Sakuta!” Kaede said, with a very cowlike groan. His sister seemed to have a thing for black-and-white animals.

“I brought some study guides. To help with your exams, Sakuta!”

Mai pulled a bundle of books out of the bag and forced them into his hands. He wasn’t about to argue. He made it a rule to accept any and all presents from Mai.

“Also, this.”

She took out a plastic DVD case. The word *Kokonoe* ran down the spine. This was Mai Sakurajima’s debut role, the morning soap that had made her a superstar.

On-screen, six-year-old Mai was sobbing her eyes out, the wails racking her body as she ran and tumbled—pouring her soul into the emotion of the scene.

Kaede clearly couldn’t take her eyes off it. At first, she’d been going, “Mai, you’re amazing!” or “You were so cute!” but before long, the story and performances held all her attention, robbing her of the ability to speak. She was fully focused on the screen, unaware her jaw was hanging open. Kaede laughed and cried with every character.

She'd only been three when this had aired and hadn't seen any of it. Sakuta himself only remembered a scene or two. He had no memories of watching it back in the day, so he'd likely seen highlights in montages of her work or the like.

"Sakuta, give me a hand?"

He turned to look and found Mai wearing an apron, waving him into the kitchen.

He left the TV and went to help her get dinner ready. This was nominally a graduation party, so it wasn't fair to make the guest of honor do all the work.

"Score these," she said, handing him the package of sausages.

He took a knife and scored each wiener three times so they wouldn't split while cooking.

"Well?" Mai asked, glancing at the screen.

"I think you're far cuter now."

"I know *that*," she said, stepping lightly on his foot. That meant "Be serious." She hadn't brought over the DVD so he could compare and contrast.

She'd brought it over because of the girl he'd met on the beach at Shichirigahama.

"They look alike. Identical."

He'd known that beyond all doubt the moment the video started. The moment he'd seen the picture on the cover. Young Mai looked just like the girl with the knapsack.

"Oh."

"But, like, that's what makes it weird."

"Weird how?"

"They're *too* similar. Like—down to the way they talk."

This had taken him a while to pick up on. But the more he watched, the more the similarities stood out.

Little Mai was definitely Mai, but since she was acting—in a sense, it *wasn't* her. This wasn't the real Mai but one playing a role. So even if she looked the same, the part she was playing should create discrepancies in gestures and word choices, signs they had different personalities. And yet he could find nothing out of place.

“I feel like the girl I met was you on TV.”

That was the best way he could put it.

“That makes even *less* sense,” Mai said, an onion in one hand.

She had a point. It didn't really clarify much of anything. Possibly even deepened the mystery.

“Wait, is that all?” Kaede asked. The DVD playback had stopped, and it had returned to the menu. “Mai, do you have the rest?”

The story itself was still unfinished. Kaede turned back, eager to see the rest.

“Sorry, I only had the first volume on hand. I bet Nodoka has the rest...”

“The siscon idol *would*.”

“I'll have to ask her, then,” Kaede said, carefully putting the disc back in the case. “Shame she couldn't make it today.”

Nodoka had been hell-bent on coming, but it had overlapped with a Sweet Bullet tour. She was likely on a stage somewhere in Niigata now, blond hair flouncing as fans screamed, “Dokaaaaa!”

“You're getting pretty tight with her, Kaede,” Mai said, smiling. She seemed happy to see Kaede getting back what she'd lost. Or maybe just glad their little sisters were friends.

“She helped me study a lot while I was figuring out my high school plans.”

That had been a huge help. Nodoka's hair and flashy makeup belied a big brain, and not only were her grades good, but she was good at teaching. She'd helped Kaede through a lot, and it was only natural they'd bonded.

As these thoughts ran through Sakuta's head, Kaede came into the kitchen, calling his name.

“What?”

“I wanna help, too.”

“Then slice these onions for me,” Mai said.

“Okay.”

“Aw, I wanted to help Mai.”

“Sakuta, when you’re done with that, rinse the rice.”

Sadly, his faint hope was soon dashed.

Following Mai’s instructions, Sakuta and Kaede got the spread ready for roll-your-own sushi night. But not just any old sushi—they had a hot plate in the center of the table and were frying meat and sausages on it, which they could then add to the rolls they made. This was why Mai had bought a variety of seafood and veggies, too.

The conversation stayed lively as the trio boasted about the successful rolls they’d created, and before they knew it, they’d eaten everything.

After dinner, they relaxed with some tea, talking, watching TV, comparing the real Mai with the one in her commercials.

Sakuta took care of the dishes while Mai was playing with Nasuno. By then, it was nine, and he hit the switch on the bath like always.

When it was full, Kaede took her turn, and Sakuta and Mai were finally alone together.

But not exactly in the mood to sit on his bed.

They were in his room, seated on opposite sides of a low folding table. On the table was a notebook filled with English vocabulary in Sakuta’s handwriting. Mai was going over it with a red pen. She’d given him a pop quiz to make sure he was hitting his daily memorization quota.

She’d said “Your room” like it meant something, and this was what he got for hoping.

And the results—well, his efforts had paid off, and he’d gotten 90 percent right. Not bad. He’d been studying on his breaks at work and school, and during

the commute itself. Mai would likely say something nice soon.

But when she finished grading, she didn't look pleased.

"Acceptable," she said, somehow making that seem disappointed.

"And what score would I need to earn your approval?"

Best he had a clear target.

"One hundred percent."

Not really feasible.

"Aww."

"Remembering these should be a given. This is basic vocabulary."

She was clearly just stating the obvious. No room to argue. Mai was strict with herself and others. But Sakuta knew she tended to go easy on him. Sometimes maybe a bit too much.

"I know Kaede was a big distraction, and you clearly didn't let that disrupt your own studies."

The stick *was* followed by a carrot.

"So I suppose you've earned *some* reward."

"I have?!"

He half rose from his seat.

"You have something in mind?" she asked.

"Actually, first...there's something you should see."

This was important, and he was on his feet anyway, so he quickly shed his sweatshirt. Naked from the waist up in the blink of an eye.

"Wha—I only said *some*!"

Mai turned her eyes away, her face bright red. But she kept glancing back at him. And she soon noticed the mark on his side.

"...Huh?"

Genuine surprise.

“What? What’s that?” she asked, growing very serious.

The pale puffy scar across Sakuta’s side was certainly alarming.

“No clue,” he said.

“Since when?”

“It wasn’t there when I got dressed this morning. Found it when I got home and changed out of my uniform.”

Mai got to her feet and came around the table.

“Let me see,” she said. Her fingers ran along the length of the scar, brushing his skin. “No strange noises this time?”

“I only just realized it myself—but I can’t actually feel you touching it.”

“How about now?”

She rubbed a little harder, but he couldn’t feel a thing.

“Here I finally get you to touch me, and I can’t even tell!”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“I’d really prefer to feel your touch than not.”

She made a face and pulled her hand away.

“Does this have anything to do with the mini me from the beach?”

Sakuta couldn’t see any connection, so he couldn’t really say for sure. But when two weird things happen in rapid succession, it’s natural to suspect a link. The timing did not seem coincidental.

Mai picked up his sweatshirt and handed it to him. “Put this on before you catch a cold,” she said.

He did as he was told and sat back down on the cushion. When their eyes met, he caught a glimpse of unease.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Based on?” Mai asked, settling down across from him. Not looking away. He could *feel* her concern.

“No matter what happens, I have you,” he said, holding her gaze. “You’re all I need, Mai.”

“Oh, right,” she said, smiling sheepishly. But then, watching his face closely, she added, “And Shouko’s no longer around.”

That was just mean.

It was very her to not let him control the conversation. She knew full well he was just trying to butter her up so she’d go easy on him. *And* she knew just how to counter him.

When he failed to respond, she grinned like she’d won. Then she said, “That reminds me,” and reached for her tote bag. She pulled a script out.

Another new shoot? He braced himself for bad news, but instead, she pulled a scrap of paper out from between the pages and put the script itself back in her bag.

“This is for you,” she said, sliding the scrap across the table.

“What is it?”

It looked like notebook paper. Folded in half.

“For good luck.”

“Like a charm?”

“Yep.”

She was blushing slightly, but no explanation was forthcoming.

Had she drawn her own charm?

Puzzled, he unfolded the scrap of paper.

It was an official form, with boxes for names at the top.

And above that it said *Marriage Application*.

“Um.”

It took him a moment, but this was clearly not the standard form. The margins were varying shades of blue, and at the bottom of the page was the illustration of a yacht floating off the coast of Enoshima.

“I was on a daytime panel show, and they had a segment on area-specific marriage applications,” Mai said, talking rather fast.

If Enoshima was on it, this must have been the Fujisawa version.

“They gave me a copy, mostly joking around. Knowing I live here. ‘It’ll come in handy when you and that boyfriend tie the knot,’ they said.”

She made it sound like this was Sakuta’s fault. A hint of “sulky child” on her face. That was usually a sign she was trying to hide her embarrassment.

“In other words, I didn’t go to the license bureau and pick it up myself or anything.”

That was clearly an important point.

“Um, Mai...”

“Yes?” she said, instantly very guarded.

“You didn’t put your name on it.”

A lovely form, sadly blank.

“I think that would double its effectiveness as a charm,” he insisted.

“Just my name,” she whispered, and she snatched the form away from him. She turned it toward her and wrote *Mai Sakurajima* on the bride’s side. Flawless handwriting. Sakuta watched closely, and she squirmed like his gaze was tickling her.

Then the form came back his way.

“Satisfied now?”

“My birthday’s next month. The tenth.”

April 10, just over a month away.

“I know.”

“Oh? Did I mention?”

“I asked Kaede.”

This was slightly pointed—Sakuta had not known when Mai’s birthday was, and she wasn’t making the same mistake. He pretended not to notice that dig,

picking up the ballpoint pen and writing *Sakuta Azusagawa* on the husband side. He couldn't remember ever writing his name so carefully in all his life.

"Which means I'm *almost* eighteen."

"Make sure to vote, then."

"I can *also* pay a visit to the license bureau."

"If you submit this on your own, I *will* be furious."

Eighteen was the legal marriageable age here.

"Seems like a small price to pay."

"Then I'll also break up with you."

"Aww."

"I'd rather do it together."

She looked up through her lashes at him, hammering the point home. This was far too cute to argue with.

"Then you hold on to it," he said, folding the application neatly. "I may not be able to resist."

"But if I'm holding on to it, it won't bring you luck."

"It's a marriage application with our names on it! I think you keeping it on your person at all times is clearly the best use for it."

"Well, if you insist...but I'm not carrying it around with me."

"Aww. It won't benefit either of us that way!"

"Fine, okay. I'll try to keep it close."

Mai was clearly back to her usual self. She took out the script again and placed the form carefully between its pages.

"For now, I'm gonna have to talk to Futaba tomorrow, about the new scar *and* the girl on the beach."

"Yes, that's probably for the best. But first—"

Without getting up, Mai hefted her hips and swung them around the table,

moving right next to Sakuta.

“Mai?”

“Show me it again.”

He didn’t waste time answering. The sweatshirt was *gone*.

“You can just pull it up, you know.”

But it was already off, so too late to argue.

“This isn’t like the last one,” she said, her face right next to his skin.

He could feel her breath on his side. It tickled, but if he said anything, she’d move away. He fought off the giggle.

“The previous scars were more like welts.”

Like cuts that had healed over. This was more like a big scrape that had formed a scab, but the scab had fallen off. Where the previous scars had looked like burns, this one was pale.

But with just the two of them in his room, and Mai this close to him, the scars were of little importance.

She was so close that all he had to do was reach out, and she’d be in his arms. He had his shirt off, but she’d come right over to him. He could almost feel her warmth in the air.

“.....”

That sweet scent would *not* leave him alone.

“Why’d you go quiet?”

Mai looked up, frowning. Their eyes met, and her long lashes blinked twice. She was cute from a distance, but even cuter this close.

“This is *definitely* your fault,” Sakuta said.

“.....?”

“I mean, it’s just the two of us.”

“.....”

She caught his drift and looked evasive.

“...Fair. Maybe I shouldn’t be winding you up.”

Mai didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“Mai?”

“And Kaede’ll be out of the bath soon.”

“So?”

“...So just a kiss,” she said, her eyes turning back to him.

Mai’s eyes closed.

She had one hand on the floor, and he put his on top of it. She shivered. But her hand turned, and her fingers locked with his.

He leaned in close.

Aaaand then the phone rang. The landline, outside his door—echoing loudly in the living room.

“That’s for you.” Mai’s lips moved, but her eyes stayed closed.

“This is so not the time.”

He tightened his grip on her hand and moved his face closer.

“Sakuta! Phone!” Kaede yelled from the changing room. She was obviously out of the bath and could hear it ringing.

“Can you answer?” he shouted back.

“Argh!” she grumbled, but he heard her stomping toward the living room.

Finally, all threats handled—or so he thought.

“Sakuta! It’s Dad!” Kaede yelled.

“.....”

“.....”

By this point, the heat of the moment had long since dissipated. Mai cleared her throat and pulled away.

“You should get that,” she said, clearly a bit disappointed. She held up his

sweatshirt.

He put it on and headed out to the living room, where he found Kaede waving at him to hurry up. She was only wearing a bath towel, hardly decent. Her hair was still dripping.

“You’ll catch a cold like that.”

“And whose fault is that?!”

She puffed out her cheeks at him and shoved the phone into his hands.

“What is it, Dad?”

As he answered, Kaede hustled off back to the changing room. She was leaving wet spots in her wake. Nasuno walked past, carefully avoiding them. Clever cat, taking care to prevent a secondary disaster.

“It’s about your mom.”

The voice on the line sounded tense.

“Okay...,” Sakuta said, bracing himself.

“They’ve given permission for her to recover at home.”

“Oh. Good, she’s getting better.”

“Yes. And when I told her about Kaede...she said she wanted to see her.”

“Mom said that?”

Like they were talking about anyone else. There’d been no change of subject. But Sakuta asked anyway because it had been two whole years since those words were even possible. The confirmation was just a reflex now.

“Yeah.” He could hear the nod in his father’s voice.

“Oh.”

He found his eyes turning to the display. It showed his father’s cell number.

“Mm.”

“Okay. Yeah.”

Sakuta felt eyes on him and looked up. Kaede was in her pajamas now, drying

her hair with a towel.

“What’s up with Mom?” she asked.

She’d overheard enough to know who this was about. Her gaze showed a mix of curiosity, doubt, and anxiety.

“Hold on a sec, Dad.”

“Sure.”

Sakuta moved the receiver away from his ear, turning to Kaede.

“Uh, Kaede...”

“Wh-what?”

Mai came out of his room, clearly intrigued. He could see her hovering behind Kaede, but he kept his attention focused on his sister.

“Do you wanna see Mom?”

Her eyes went wide. “Yes,” she said, as if the answer were set in stone. “I want to go see her.”

Then she said it one more time, as if double-checking how she really felt.

“I want to see Mom again.”

She nodded to herself, and Sakuta put the phone back to his ear.

“Dad.”

“...I heard.”

There were tears in his father’s voice, but Sakuta wasn’t about to point that out.

“Okay,” he said.

That was all they needed now.

4

“Odd,” Rio said. “I thought you *weren’t* a pedophile.”

This was what he got for telling her about actually encountering the mini Mai

from his dream.

“I’m not!”

Sakuta sat down on a stool, doing up the buttons of his shirt. (He’d removed it to show her the scars.) The day after graduation, Monday, March 2. The day before Hinamatsuri.

Classes were over, and the baseball team was yelling on the field outside the windows. Typical afternoon sounds. They’d just held a graduation ceremony the day before, but the school itself was back to normal. It was a bit quieter without the third-years around, but not enough to feel weird.

Sakuta had rolled into school like always, taken classes like normal, and swung by the science lab just like he usually did.

Third-years had been largely absent from school since optional attendance began in February anyway, so he’d naturally acclimated to their disappearance. He’d never spoken to any third-years but Mai to begin with, so their graduation didn’t really hit him the same way.

“.....”

While Rio put her thoughts in order, Sakuta did his best not to distract her and ended up staring vacantly at the bubbles on the sides of the beaker. The flame of the alcohol burner swayed as he breathed.

When the water came to a boil, Rio silently put the cap on, extinguishing the flame.

“Situationally speaking, it seems safe to assume the cause lies with you or Sakurajima.”

She used a glass rod to stir her mug of coffee, then added milk, watching it swirl with anticipation. She took a sip and then put it back down on the table. Rio looked up, scanning his face for clues. Checking to see if he had any idea why one of them would be back in Adolescence Syndrome mode.

“I’ve got the cutest girlfriend in the world, so what worries could I have?”

The only hard part was all this studying he was doing to grant her wish.

“So you think it’s her?”

“Not that she’s aware of. She and her mom don’t exactly get along, so I assumed that was it, but...”

“But something suggested it isn’t?”

“Apparently, they’re taking baby steps toward mending things.”

Mai had voluntarily introduced Sakuta to her mother the day before.

She’d talked as though her issues with her mother weren’t going anywhere, but to him, it felt like the passage of time was slowly leading them in the right direction.

Sure, the bad blood between them would probably never go away completely.

But they no longer felt like something raw enough to cause Adolescence Syndrome.

Mai had the strength to handle the emotions her mother dredged up, was aware of her own hang-ups, and was trying to move toward closure. Like going from stark black and white to shades of gray.

Sakuta considered that a good thing and likely the only real resolution anyone could expect.

Mai knew full well her relationship with her mother would never be pure, simple, and clean again. She’d accepted that and the natural implications. And that was why Sakuta felt she’d be okay.

“So then the problem *is* with you?”

“Like I said, nope.”

“Maybe you’re scared of being this happy.”

Rio took a sip of coffee. She didn’t seem all that concerned.

“Do you really think *that* would cause Adolescence Syndrome?”

“I don’t see why not. All kinds of fears lurk in the hearts of man. Stands to reason some are afraid of losing what they have.”

Rio shook her head, like that would never apply to her.

“But I’m planning on becoming even happier, so I’ve got nothing to be scared of.”

“That’s optimistic,” she said. But there was a hint of a smile; there was no real spite in her quip. Perhaps a raised eyebrow or two, but obviously she wished him the best with that.

“But there’s still the kid who looks like Sakurajima,” Rio said, getting things back on track. She looked a bit tense.

“Mm?”

“Only you saw her.”

“Yeah.”

“Sakurajima was there but didn’t?”

She was really trying to be clear about this.

“That’s right,” Sakuta said with a nod.

“If that means they can’t both exist at once or can’t both be perceived at once, then that means Sakurajima and the knapsack kid are bound by fate somehow.”

“Like how we couldn’t observe both of you at the same time, Futaba?”

“Or how we never saw big and little Shouko together.”

“.....Ahhh.”

“And I have no idea how that relates to the new scar on your side, Azusagawa.”

“You were my sole hope there.”

“If you’re clutching at straws, maybe run it by Shouko?”

“I suppose that’s one course of action.”

“She has memories of many potential futures, after all.”

“That’s why I don’t wanna ask.”

“Because she flew off to Okinawa without warning you?”

“Yep.”

If she’d intentionally not mentioned it, then it just wasn’t worth mentioning. Something minor enough that he would definitely be able to handle it on his own.

But if that wasn’t it, and Shouko had never come across anything like this in all her futures, then he *really* couldn’t ask. It would just make her worry.

“Makinohara is busy living her best life.”

And he didn’t want to interfere.

“She deserves to be happier than anyone.”

“Are you allowed to rank her above Sakurajima?”

“Mai and I will be more than happy enough together.”

They’d promised they would be, and even if they hadn’t, Sakuta would’ve made it happen anyway.

“Then this is no time to be getting weird scars on you.”

“I know!”

He glanced at the clock above the chalkboard.

It was almost four.

“You got a date?” Rio asked.

“Something like that.”

He stood up and shouldered his backpack.

“Don’t cheat too often,” Rio called.

And with that, Sakuta left the science lab behind.

5

It was still light out as he left. All winter, the skies to the west had been turning red at this hour. They were a certain blue, heralding the turn of the seasons. Sakuta made the short hike to Shichirigahama Station.

The train pulled in just as he arrived, and he hopped aboard and took it back to Fujisawa.

Mingling with middle-aged sightseers, foreign tourists, students, and kids with knapsacks, he passed through the gates and headed across the bridge toward the JR station.

A twentysomething man was busking in the square outside the electronics store. A circle of students in uniform had formed around him. The high school girls walking in front of Sakuta were chatting about it.

“A Touko Kirishima cover?”

“He’s *good*.”

“Let’s stop and listen.”

They joined the group.

Touko Kirishima was an artist Mai had told him about. The next big thing, apparently. Did all her stuff on some video site. If she was getting covered on the street like this, she had definitely hit the big leagues.

But he had places to be, so he simply glanced at the busker in passing and moved on. He turned left at the electronics store and went down the stairs.

His path home led off to the right, but like Rio had implied, he had a date.

On the street below, he followed the road to the restaurant he worked at.

Inside, a cute waitress with fluffy short hair called out a greeting, but her smile wilted when she saw him.

“Oh, it’s just *you*, senpai.”

Tomoe Koga rolled her eyes at him. She was a year below him at school.

“I’m a customer today,” he said.

“I know. Your name wasn’t on the shift list.”

“.....”

“D-don’t!”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t act like I was specifically checking your shifts. I just wondered who was working today!”

“I didn’t imply any of that.”

“But inside your head, you definitely made it weird.”

“Well, that’s just what teenage boys do.”

“Ugh, you’re so gross.”

He’d made a generalization, yet she blamed him alone. Giving him her most disgusted look.

“I just thought you were extra cute today, Koga.”

“Th-that, I’ll allow, but don’t say it out loud!”

“Then I won’t think it, either.”

“I said thinking’s okay!”

While they were going at it, the door behind him opened.

Another customer entered.

“Welcome! Table for one?” Tomoe asked, her smile back on.

“It’s now two,” Miwako Tomobe said, giving Sakuta a mischievous wink.

He told Tomoe this could be a while, so she found them an out-of-the-way seat by the windows.

They ordered drinks, and Miwako got some pancakes as well. While she ate, they chatted about Sakuta’s college plans and how Kaede was holding up. Basically just small talk.

Tomoe cleared away the empty plate, and they refilled their drinks, and then Sakuta got down to business.

“This is about our mother,” he began.

That was why he’d arranged for the two of them to meet.

“Your father didn’t tell me much, but...she’s institutionalized?”

“She’s in and out these days. Home recuperation. But still spending plenty of

time at the hospital.”

He was being really vague because he didn’t know the details, either. His father was trying not to worry them. And Sakuta had been preoccupied with the two Kaedes.

“But apparently she’s on the mend.”

Which meant he had questions he needed to run by Miwako.

“Okay.”

“See, Mom said she wanted to see Kaede.”

He was pretty sure Miwako had figured out where this was going. When he finally put it out there, she nodded slowly.

“Ah.”

“And when Kaede heard, she said she wanted to see her. To go visit.”

“Yeah. That makes sense.”

“And I know it’s a good thing she feels that way, but...”

Sakuta was glad that Kaede wanted to see her mother. And that she’d said as much.

“But I’m just not sure it’s safe to do that.”

He felt that was a sad thing to admit, but no use hiding it from Miwako. This was why he was asking her advice, so bravado would just get in the way.

“You’re worried about Kaede?”

Seeing her mom again could well be quite a blow. Her condition wasn’t Kaede’s fault, but the bullying she’d been through had made their mother lose confidence in her parenting skills and started her breakdown. If she saw what their mother was like now, Kaede might feel responsible. And that might crush her.

She was finally able to go outside, go to school, and decide her own path in life... Sakuta didn’t want to see her closing herself off again.

He wanted Kaede to see their mother, to be able to visit her. But as much as

he wanted her to move forward, the what-ifs kept his feet glued to the ground.

“You’re a classic big brother.”

“Mm?”

He almost spit his tea.

“You’re really playing the role to the hilt.”

“Meaning?”

Miwako didn’t answer. Instead, she simply put her thoughts on the subject in plain words.

“If you’re there for her, I’m sure Kaede will be okay.”

“.....?”

That wasn’t a reason he was prepared to accept.

“Kaede’s worked out that you will always have her back, and that’ll get her through most things.”

“.....”

It still didn’t feel right.

“You don’t believe me.”

He trusted Miwako and believed she meant what she said. She’d been there for Kaede all this time, patiently working with her. It was his own part in this that Sakuta had no faith in. And it was his part that Miwako was basing her confidence on.

“Should I list all the good things about you until you start feeling confident?”

“No thanks.”

That would just be torture.

He might not be on board with her logic, but he decided to trust her overall judgment. That was better than trying to prevent Kaede from seeing her mother.

“In which case, I think you should allow them to meet as long as your mother is up to it. Have you picked a date?”

“Working on it. I figured I should talk to you first, Ms. Tomobe.”

The idea of consulting Miwako had come up in the conversation with his father, and that had led directly to their meeting today.

“Mom hasn’t actually talked to her advisers about it, either, so we’re waiting on an answer from them.”

“Ah. Well, let’s hope it works out.”

Miwako gave him a warm smile. Her words were heartfelt.

And he finally felt like he understood what she was saying. He finally accepted it.

It wasn’t *just* Sakuta. Kaede had people around her who were there to worry and there to help. Miwako had her back, and so did Mai and Nodoka. Kotomi Kano had come over to visit, and that had helped. Having people like that gave Kaede the courage to keep going.

She’d been through her share of hardship, but she’d still managed to find things important to her. And that’s why she’d be fine.

Miwako finished off her tea. She put the empty cup down on the saucer and looked Sakuta in the eye.

“Are *you* okay?”

“.....?”

“You don’t get why I’d be worried.”

That was more or less accurate.

“Rifts between family members in adolescence tend to play along gender lines. Mothers and daughters are particularly prone to it, so I’m not actually *that* concerned. But...you haven’t seen your mother in a long time, Sakuta.”

“Well...no.”

“Do *you* want to see her?”

“.....”

Her question didn’t exactly come out of nowhere. They’d talked about his

mother before. The answer shouldn't have been this elusive.

But when she asked, Sakuta found himself weirdly reluctant. He tried to say yes, but the word stuck in his throat.

“...I might...be a little scared of it.”

When he dug down to the source of his reluctance, those words came out. Once he put his mind to it, his fears were hardly trivial. He could see them clearly now. He might have only just realized it, but this had been gnawing away at him for some time—and he wasn't sure when.

It had been two long years.

If he saw his mother again, how would he begin?

Should he just be all, “Hey, long time no see,” or...would that be wildly inappropriate? He tried to imagine how he'd feel, how he'd act, what he'd do... and he didn't know how it would turn out, what was right, or what he even wanted. He couldn't form any clear picture of it.

“I just don't know what to say. Kaede always talked to her more than I did. That's true for Dad as well.”

“Tell me about your mother.”

“I mean...she's like anyone else. I guess she's pretty chill. She was a housewife and did a good job with the housework.”

Cooking three meals a day, cleaning all the rooms, doing everyone's laundry... She had a lot on her plate, but Sakuta never really noticed any failings on her part.

Every now and then there'd be a pile of dirty laundry or takeout for dinner or instant ramen for lunch, but he'd never once heard her complain about having too much work. But doing all that work takes a toll, and there must have been days when she didn't feel up to it.

When they'd moved out, he'd had to do it all himself, and...he understood that now.

“And...”

But he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Even though they'd lived together for fifteen years before he'd moved to Fujisawa.

There should have been more.

"We so often don't know our parents."

"...I guess so."

"Especially boys. You don't know about your parents' childhoods, when they first fell in love, what friends they have or had, or even how your parents met."

"....."

Sakuta could only nod. He didn't know *any* of that.

He felt pretty sure he'd talked to his father *more* since they started living apart. In junior high, all their interactions had been through his mother. "Your father said..." or "I told your father..."

And his conversations with his mother had mostly been answering whatever questions she asked. He'd never really been inclined to share what he'd done that day—but Kaede had.

Kaede had always been close to their mother, and closer to their dad than Sakuta had been. The three of them were a close-knit family.

It was weird. He was trying to remember any conversations he'd had with his mother, but nothing came to mind. They must have all been about such ordinary things that nothing had stuck.

"Good morning," "Dinner's ready," "Thanks for cooking," "I'll be back late today," "I'm off to school," "I'm home," "Bath's ready," "Bath's free," "Good night."

They'd probably had more interactions than *that*, but all just part of the daily routine, and nothing that would catch in the nets of his mind.

And that's *why* he had no clue what to do if he saw her again. He'd never really thought about how to talk to her. Their conversations had always been about regular, everyday stuff. And since that wasn't an option, he was freaking

out a bit. He'd never spoken to her under less than ordinary circumstances.

But realizing that felt like a weight had lifted off his chest.

"I'm glad I talked to you about this," he said.

"Oh?"

Miwako blinked at him.

"It helped me figure out what's going through my mind."

"Well, if there's anything bothering you, feel free to ask."

"I'll do that."

Miwako sent him off with one last encouragement. "I hope Kaede gets to see her mother."

6

That evening, his dad called again. After talking to their mother's doctor, they'd recommended waiting until Kaede had graduated from junior high.

Naturally, this suggestion was made with an eye on Kaede's well-being.

Her graduation was set for next week, March 9.

Sakuta had no objections and agreed readily enough.

"Are you coming to her graduation?"

March 9 was a Monday. A regular old weekday.

Kaede was hovering near the phone, very curious.

"I'll be there."

"Okay. Good."

He gave Kaede the nod, and she managed an awkward smile. Her reaction said she was glad he was coming but also embarrassed by it. It looked like relief was winning out. She picked Nasuno up and gave her a hug.

If their father hadn't gone, Sakuta had planned on attending, but no such luck. A perfect excuse to ditch school went right out the window.

“I’ll talk to your mother and settle on a date to visit.”

That likely involved keeping a close eye on her condition.

“Got it,” he said.

Sakuta hung up, leaving his own opinions unsaid.

For the next few days, they tried to act like everything was normal—but the meeting with their mother was on their minds.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, they both got up and went to school. Sakuta was doing his best to apply himself in classes and hitting his flash cards on breaks and the commute. He also worked a few shifts and went to school again the next day. A busy schedule.

Yet at the slightest opportunity, Sakuta’s head would fill with thoughts of his mother. Anytime he passed a mom of her generation, anytime he saw a mom her height at the grocery store...

Especially if he saw a mom out with a daughter who was Kaede’s age. Seeing these families laughing together made him hope Kaede and their mother could act like that again someday.

He’d felt like that for a long time.

But reality was far from that ideal, and so much had happened with the other Kaede, so he’d forced it out of his mind. At one point, he’d completely given up on it. But giving up didn’t mean those feelings had gone away.

And the world was filled with triggers to remind him. There were so many ordinary families.

He spent his whole Saturday at work. In the evening, Mai called from a shoot somewhere in Yamanashi.

“How’d the college thing go, Mai?”

The exam results were posted today, March 7.

“I’m in.”

She’d sounded excited from the get-go, so he’d figured as much. There was never really any doubt she’d pass. Mai Sakurajima didn’t fail.

“Congrats, Mai.”

“Thanks.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Oh? No ‘You’ve gotta do your part, Sakuta’?”

“I know you are.”

“So if I don’t get in next year, you won’t be mad?”

“I’d wait *one* more year if I had to.”

“I don’t want to be stuck studying *that* long. Best I pass the first time.”

She’d manipulated him into promising. If this was “The North Wind and the Sun,” she’d have gone with the sun strategy.

Pleased with her victory, Mai said good night and hung up.

The next day was Sunday, March 8, yet Sakuta took Kaede out of the house bright and early.

They rode a train from Fujisawa Station for a solid hour and wound up in the heart of Shinjuku. They were here for a remote-learning school’s presentation.

It lasted a good hour and a half, but Kaede listened with rapt attention, taking furious notes. She was doing her best to pick the right school for herself.

When that was over, their dad caught up with them, and they had some individual consultations. This school didn’t claim to offer cutting-edge online classes for no reason; as long as they applied by the end of March, she’d be counted as a freshman that April. Three more weeks to decide. The teacher who met with Kaede said, “You’ve got time to think. No need to rush.” Unlike conventional schools, this one had no real cap on admissions and no need to demand paperwork early.

Their father and Sakuta both thought Kaede would want to go home and sleep on it, but she proved them wrong.

As the meeting ended and they rose to leave, Kaede said, “I want to go here.” She made her feelings known right away.

It didn't seem like she was rushing into it or at all uncertain. She looked pleased with herself, like she'd said what she'd been thinking the whole time.

The teacher got a laptop ready, and they filled out the online application.

The school itself would take a few days to reach a decision, but this effectively settled Kaede's high school plans.

Glad to have that out of the way, the next day she set off for graduation in high spirits.

As promised, their father was there, and Mai sneaked in, too. Sakuta didn't find out until he got home.

Mai had walked home from graduation with Kaede and was still with her. She'd come back from Yamanashi first thing that morning. She had her hair tied up and draped over one shoulder. She was wearing fake glasses and a drab formal jacket. He'd almost never seen her in a pencil skirt, so he seared that into his eyeballs, and she silently stomped his foot.

Nodoka joined them that evening, once her idol lessons were done, and they had their second low-key graduation party.

Kaede had successfully attended graduation, and her next school was lined up, so she was looking a lot more confident. She was talking with Mai and Nodoka, at least 20 percent more chatty than usual.

With Kaede free of junior high, they were now in "wait for Dad to call" mode. But they couldn't exactly stand by the phone 24-7, so Sakuta was busy going to school and sitting the final exams of his second year.

Even when he was home, he was mostly studying; the next day, he'd be back at school for another test. Rinse and repeat all week long without much else happening.

The only other incident of note arrived when he checked the mailbox after exams and found a letter from Shouko in Okinawa.

It included a photo of her looking healthy, a beautiful Okinawan ocean behind her. She was wearing a short-sleeved white sundress and a straw hat. The letter said it had been nearly 80 degrees out.

A big difference from Kanto, which was barely starting to show signs of spring.

———*I'll write again.*

The letter ended with that and made no mention of Adolescence Syndrome. Sakuta figured that meant Shouko knew nothing about the new scar on his side or the little girl who looked just like Mai.

“Well, if she doesn’t know, she’s better off not knowing.”

He’d have to write back. For the moment, he put the letter away in a drawer.

And then the weekend arrived.

Saturday, March 14.

Nodoka had invited them to a concert venue in Yokohama. Sweet Bullet was performing. Mai was back in Yamanashi, shooting that TV show.

This was doubling as Nodoka’s birthday concert, so it was a shame Mai couldn’t be there, but her fans were cheering extra hard, and she worked up a real sweat, clearly having a great time.

After the concert, since it was also White Day, there was a meet and greet where the group members passed out cookies.

You could get a single cookie from whichever member was your favorite.

Sakuta got in line for Sweet Bullet’s leader, Uzuki Hirokawa. He got a cookie and a handshake. Apparently, she always went all out no matter what she was doing, which explained why his hand was still throbbing.

Naturally, Nodoka was all, “Why’d you get in Zukki’s line?!”

“Wanted to thank her for her help with Kaede’s high school.”

A pretty legitimate reason.

“...That’s it?”

“I also like idols who don’t wear panties.”

Equally legitimate.



ng!

fun.

write again,

Shouko Makinohara

“She wears them!”

Kaede had come with him, and *she* got in Nodoka’s line.

As they were getting ready to leave, Uzuki made time for them to thank her again, which involved another full-power handshake. It was past nine by the time they left.

Kaede was almost never out after dark, so walking the streets at night must have been a thrill for her.

“You were amazing, Nodoka!”

“Well, yeah.”

“Uzuki was really cool, too.”

“Yep.”

“I wanna go to more concerts.”

Clearly, she was a big fan.

It was after ten before they made it home.

“We’re baaack,” he said, and Nasuno poked her face out from the living room, meowing at them.

He gave her a late dinner, and Kaede called, “Sakuta, there’s a message on the machine.”

He looked up. The red light was flashing.

Maybe Mai had called while on location.

“.....”

But he saw an anxious look in Kaede’s eyes.

He didn’t have to ask why. The same thought had crossed his mind. There was only one other person likely to call.

He was feeling nervous already. He could sense a wave of tension rising up inside him. Before it got too much, he moved to the phone and pressed the button.

——One message. 8:21 PM.

Neither of them took their eyes off the phone. Neither of them could.

“About visiting you mother—”

Their father’s voice.

“She’s in good shape right now. I know it’s sudden, but would tomorrow afternoon work?”

He got right to the point, no wasted words.

“I’ll call back later.”

The message ended, and the room got real quiet.

“Well, Kaede?”

“.....”

Rather than answer, she just nodded. No hesitation.

“Okay. Guess we’ll see her tomorrow.”

He picked up the phone and called their dad back.

“Dad? It’s me—”

Character
Profile



Mystery Kid
Who Looks
Like Mai

? ? ?

A little girl who spoke to Sakuta on the beach at Shichirigahama. She looks exactly like Mai did as a child star.



the shape of a bond

1

The next day was Sunday, March 15, and the dawn brought cloudy skies and scattered drizzles.

Sakuta and Kaede got up at eight and worked their way through a breakfast of toast, eggs, yogurt, and orange juice.

When they were done, they did the dishes and turned on the TV to hide how quiet the room was. A review of the week's big news, sports highlights, and the latest in entertainment washed over them, leaving very little impression.

Just before eleven, Sakuta said, "Time we got ready."

It was almost time to visit their mother.

"Right," Kaede said, nodding a bit too much. She was tense. Her movements were stiff as she went to her room. Once she was out of sight, Sakuta headed to his own room.

He stripped out of his indoor clothes and put on a T-shirt and jeans, with a hoodie over the top. The weather lady had said they were in for some warm spring weather, so he probably wouldn't need a jacket.

Back in the living room, Sakuta realized Kaede was still holed up. He could hear noises that suggested she was still changing.

A good five minutes later, she finally emerged. She had on a dress with straps over the shoulders, and a basic cardigan over that. A look with one toe in "grown-up." Nothing flashy, but clearly dressed to impress.

"I-it's not weird, is it?" she asked the moment their eyes met. She still looked very tense.

"Only your face," he said.

"I'm asking about the clothes!"

Even her scowl was tense.

"Mai gave you those?"

“Mm.”

“Then no way they’re weird.”

“Sometimes things look good on her and not on me.”

“We’d better head out.”

Ignoring her protestations, he headed for the door.

“Augh, wait up!”

She came running after him. He paused long enough for her to get her shoes on, then reached for the door handle.

He just had to open it like he always did. But it sure felt different today. Today, this would lead them to their mother. For the first time in two years.

He opened the door.

Drops pattering down around them, Sakuta matched Kaede’s pace on the hill from their apartment. They were walking a bit farther apart than normal so their umbrellas wouldn’t bump. They took it one step at a time to the station.

From below, the sound of rain drumming their umbrellas was awfully loud. It wasn’t even raining that hard. But there were no other noises around, so the patter really stood out.

He thought he heard Kaede say something.

“Mm?” he asked.

“I said, it sure is raining.”

She tilted her umbrella to one side, peering up at the sky. She seemed disappointed.

Today was a big day.

To most people, it might be just another Sunday, but for the two of them, it was probably the biggest day in years. Kaede had been hoping for sunshine.

“Dad said it’s a good thing. No allergies.”

“Oh. Maybe true.”

Kaede forced herself to agree, then glanced up at him, smiling awkwardly. The

stress she'd shown at home was still there; her smile wasn't usually this strained.

As if trying to settle her nerves, she said, "Sakuta."

"Mm?"

"We're passing through Yokohama Station on the way, right?"

"Yep."

A station that seemed to be permanently under construction. Probably less "never finished" and more "constantly evolving." He hoped he'd see it completed at least once in his lifetime.

"What about it?"

"I wanna bring Mom some pudding. The kind from the basement there, in the beaker."

"Oh, the one with the hard-boiled guy on the side."

When they were little, every time they went shopping at Yokohama Station, they'd always brought that home with them. The chain had started in Hayama or Zushi, but they had a branch inside a Yokohama department store.

"Mom really liked those."

"Oh? I thought you were the one who liked them."

"I do! But Mom does, too."

"If you say so."

Miwako had *just* made him realize how little he knew about his parents, and now it was dawning on him how little he knew about what his mother even liked. He had a vague idea she liked pumpkin, but he'd never actually *asked*. It had never even occurred to him to do so, and that had never been a problem before.

"So I wanna share them with her again."

"Got it."

She'd likely be delighted. At the very least, she'd know why Kaede brought

them.

“Also, Sakuta...”

“Some siumai?”

These Chinese dumplings had been a staple on their dining table after Yokohama visits. They were good even cold.

“Oh, I do want to have those again. But no, that’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“.....”

She’d brought it up, but Kaede just stared at the ground for a minute, not saying the next thing. Just watching one foot move after the other. He glanced at her profile, and she looked extra anxious.

So he knew right away why.

“Mom’s the one who suggested this. It’ll be okay,” he said, watching the road ahead for the both of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her flinch.

He kept his eyes faced front.

“How’d you know, Sakuta?”

“It was written all over your face.”

“What did it say?”

““It’s my fault Mom’s had such a hard time. What if she holds it against me?””

She was likely worrying that their reunion would be mean, spiteful, or hostile. It *wasn’t* Kaede’s fault the bullies had come after her, but those events had been the straw that broke their mother...and that fact was undeniable.

And Kaede’s guilt was seated pretty deep. He couldn’t just tell her not to feel that way.

Misfortune had brought them to this point, but once you start blaming your own weakness, it’s hard to shake that notion.

Kaede certainly couldn’t do it alone.

She'd always be left wondering if they'd still be living together if she'd been stronger, if she'd managed to beat the bullies.

"Mom's *really* not mad at me?"

"She might be mad if she heard you saying that."

"....."

"I sure would be."

"Mm..."

That brought Kaede's head up at last, but her anxiety remained. Even if he'd eased her fears a bit, she was still really stressed out about this visit.

He didn't blame her.

That's just how big the rift in their family was. A two-year gulf. You couldn't just hop over it and suddenly be *happy*.

So Kaede's nerves stayed raw all the way to Fujisawa Station and didn't ease up on the train ride to Yokohama. When they got off at Yokohama Station, they swung by the department store and bought pudding and siumai (because why not), and she was smiling, but it was very strained.

The closer they got to their destination, the less she was talking. After boarding the Keihin-Tohoko Line, she stopped speaking almost entirely.

"We'll be switching trains at the next stop."

"....."

She was just silently nodding now.

They got off at Higashi-Kanagawa Station and switched to the Yokohama Line, which took them all the way to Hachioji. The Yokohama Line was a pretty weird name for a line that didn't actually stop at Yokohama Station. There were actually a number of through service trains running on the line that did stop there, but...if you didn't know that, it was kinda confusing.

Kaede sat down in the empty carriage, holding the box of pudding carefully. Her eyes were on the windows, but she likely wasn't seeing any of it. Her head was probably filled with thoughts of their mother.

Sakuta decided not to say anything. He thought she'd be okay even if she didn't. She might be nervous, but she was past the point where that could stop her.

She might not be going fast, but she was moving toward their mother at her own pace. Of her own free will.

It was a ten-minute ride on a silver train with a yellow-green line on the side. Outside, they could see a huge building coming up. Round and tall, clearly not an office or an apartment tower.

This was the International Stadium Yokohama, where the Japan national soccer team played and where the World Cup final had been held. Nowadays, it was called Nissan Stadium. The lack of any other large buildings around really made it loom.

When the train pulled into Kozukue Station—the closest stop to the stadium—Sakuta said, “Here,” and they got off.

Outside the gates, they headed to the south exit, away from the stadium. They reached the main thoroughfare and turned right, then followed the road for a while.

The rain was coming down harder now. Drops splattering on the pavement made their shoes wet. Kaede didn't grumble at all and just huddled under her umbrella, doing her best to keep the pudding dry. Like a mother bird trying to keep her eggs warm in a chilly breeze.

He knew she was really looking forward to eating pudding with their mom again. And wasn't about to let a little rain ruin that.

They followed the road for a while, and then he signaled a right turn into an alley.

“Almost there.”

“.....Mm.”

True to his word, Sakuta led them about five yards farther. The muddy ground squished beneath their feet.

“Here?”

Kaede stopped short, looking up at the building. It was an old three-story apartment building. The exterior had been given a fresh coat of paint, but the outdoor stairs and the general vibe made it clear it had been built a long time ago.

This was Sakuta's second time here.

He'd visited once, shortly after they'd started living apart, figuring he should at least know where his dad lived. His father had said the building was worker housing, built forty years ago.

With no elevator, they had to climb the stairs to the third floor.

Outside unit 301 was a tiny card reading AZUSAGAWA.

"Ready?" he asked, finger hovering over the doorbell.

"N-not yet!" she said, a momentary panic washing over her.

"Okay," he said, ringing the doorbell anyway.

"S-Sakuta!" Kaede wailed, looking betrayed.

"The longer we draw it out, the harder it'll be."

If waiting made people relaxed, they'd never be stressed in the first place.

"I—I guess...," she said, clearly not entirely convinced. "But you're the one who asked."

She would've yelled at him if he hadn't, too. That's why he'd paid lip service to it. Clearly, she hadn't realized how considerate her brother was. How sad.

As he lamented this, he heard the latch turn, and the door swung inward.

"You get wet?" their dad asked, stepping out. It was his day off, but he was in a dress shirt and slacks. If he put a tie on, he'd be ready for work.

"Even my socks are soaked," Sakuta said.

Their dad held the door open for them, and Sakuta waved Kaede in ahead.

She stepped inside, and Sakuta followed her. The door closed. They took off their shoes and socks, and their dad put out slippers for them. They wore them barefoot.

“Thanks for having us,” Kaede whispered, so quietly no one could hear.

Their dad lived here, so in a sense this was their house, too. But it didn’t smell like home, and that made it feel like they didn’t belong. Like they were visiting a stranger’s house.

Their father seemed a little unsure of himself, too, but he quickly got his wits together and led them farther in. Today was about other things.

“Dear, Kaede and Sakuta are here,” he called.

There were curtains hanging between the entrance and the main room, blocking the view.

“.....”

He could feel Kaede tensing up again.

Hoping to loosen her back up, he moved up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Sakuta felt them twitch, and she looked back at him.

“Come on,” he said.

“.....Mm.”

Once she answered, he gave her a little push.

It was a two-bedroom apartment. A short hall led away from the entrance, with the dining room just past the curtains.

And Kaede stepped in under her own power.

On the other side of the curtains was a dining table and chairs, and a woman seated at it. She looked a bit worn-out. Thinner than Sakuta remembered her. For a moment, she seemed smaller, but the way her hair flowed over her shoulders was the same—it was unmistakably their mother.

“Mom,” Kaede said.

Their mother’s gaze rose from the table. It flickered right and left, then landed on Kaede.

“Mom,” she said again. Louder this time.

“Kaede...”

Her voice was a rasp. If he hadn't been listening for it, he might have missed it. But Sakuta heard it, their dad heard it, and so did Kaede.

"Mm. It's me, Mom."

Kaede took a step closer. Then another. She put the box of pudding down on the table and then went around it to their mother, reaching out and taking her hands.

"Mom...", she said, tears in her voice. Like she'd forgotten all other words, she kept saying it. Like she was trying to make up for two years of not ever saying the word.

Their mother nodded every time.

"Mom..."

"Mm..."

"Mom..."

"Mm..."

"Mom."

"Kaede, that's all you've said."

"I know..."

"You're so tall now."

"Yeah."

Their mother grabbed a towel and dried the tears from her daughter's face.

"You cut your hair," she said, putting her hands on Kaede's shoulders and looking her over.

"Is it weird?" Kaede messed with her locks.

"No. It's much more grown-up."

Kaede looked relieved, embarrassed, and glad.

"Um, I had it done at a place Mai recommended—uh, Mai is Sakuta's girlfriend. He's got one! Shocking, right? Anyway..."

Once the words started, Kaede couldn't be stopped. Words and feelings came tumbling out of her.

Two years, they'd lived apart.

Four more months since Kaede had overcome her dissociative disorder.

That was a lot of time, and a lot had happened to her. She'd made it back to school. Struggled with exams. Chosen her own future. A whole stockpile of "things I did today" that she always used to tell her mom.

She could talk and talk and never run out. Never be at a loss for words.

They'd been told it was best to keep this first visit to an hour or two, but when Sakuta first thought to check the clock, it was already way past that. They'd already been here three whole hours.

Kaede had been talking the whole time, but now her stomach was growling.

"It's a bit early, but let's have dinner," their mother said.

And for the first time in ages, the four of them sat down together. Their father helped Sakuta cook, and they warmed up the siumai he'd brought, too.

Even during dinner, Kaede never stopped talking. "I wanna eat *your* croquettes again, Mom. I'll help make them!" and "That sounds good. Let's do that." They just kept heating up. It felt like the time that had been frozen between them was thawing again.

For dessert, they had the pudding Kaede had carried here so carefully.

"That is good."

"Mm, really."

Both their mother and Kaede, enjoying the reminder of the old times, suddenly teared up without warning. They were being a family again.

Their mother looked so much healthier to Sakuta than she had when they arrived. There was life in her eyes again.

Not long ago, he hadn't dared hope a day like this would come. Just being a normal family again had seemed so far away.

But Kaede was trying to change that, trying to get back what they'd lost.

And that made Sakuta so, so happy.

Before they knew it, it was past eight.

Sakuta and his father did the dishes, and when they finished, Kaede was still chattering away, telling her mother all about where she chose to go to high school.

Nobody seemed inclined to wrap things up.

Their father must have figured that was his job. Just before nine, he said, "It's getting awfully late..."

Perhaps their mother's answer was inevitable.

"Why don't you stay the night?"

She was smiling at Kaede.

"Can I?" Kaede asked.

"Of course."

"Sakuta...?"

Kaede seemed unsure if it was her choice to make, and she turned to Sakuta and their father. Sakuta looked at their dad, making sure. From what he'd seen of their mother, Kaede spending the night didn't seem like a big deal. There was a chance it could even be a good thing.

Junior high graduation was over. No classes tomorrow. Kaede was on spring vacation. Nobody would yell at her for spending the night with her family.

Their dad thought for a moment and said, "Sure, let's do that."

They wanted to respect their mother's wishes.

"Sakuta?" Kaede asked.

"I'm going to head back. Gotta feed Nasuno."

And he *did* have school. They'd likely only get the grades for last week's exams back...but even so, they couldn't exactly leave their cat to fend for herself.

"You could bring Nasuno here."

“How’s she doing?”

“Great.”

“You can bring her next time,” their father said.

“This place allows pets?”

Worker housing often didn’t.

“If I explain in advance, they’ll probably allow it for one night.”

That was a roundabout way of saying no.

“Then I’d better go,” Sakuta said, standing up.

“Take care.”

“You look after Mom.”

“Got it.”

He moved to the door and put his shoes on.

“I’ll come again, Mom,” he called before stepping outside. He managed to remember his umbrella.

His father put sandals on and followed him down.

“It stopped raining.”

There were still clouds above, but nothing was falling from them.

The air felt fresh, like all the grime in it had been washed away.

“Thanks, Sakuta.”

“Mm.”

He wasn’t sure what he was being thanked for but figured having it spelled out would just be embarrassing.

But even so, he kinda got it. All four of them had been together. It might just have been a few hours, but it was a time they’d thought would never come again. That may not have seemed like much to people who didn’t know them, but for Sakuta’s family, it was downright miraculous. He was pretty sure that was what prompted his father’s gratitude.

Simple words could mean so much.

“Tell that to Kaede.”

“I will.”

“She’ll be thrilled.”

“Yeah.”

“.....”

“.....”

“I’d better go.”

He started walking.

“Sakuta,” his dad called.

“Mm?”

“I’ve been meaning to give you this,” he said, holding out a dull silver key.

“For...?” Sakuta glanced up at the apartment above.

“Yeah. You might need it.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He took the key, still warm from his father’s touch. Then he waved. This time he really was leaving.

“Take care.”

“Look after Mom and Kaede.”

They kept it simple, and Sakuta headed for the station. He knew his father watched him till he was out of sight. But he didn’t turn back until he was safe around the corner.

He didn’t know what state his face would have been in, and his father likely wouldn’t have known how to respond, either.

But Sakuta moved forward, feeling a bit more positive than usual.

That elation stayed with him the whole way home.

On the way to the station.

During the wait for the train.

While changing to the other line.

As he watched the scenery pass outside.

His body was so filled with joy, he felt heat throbbing inside, filling him with energy, filling his sails.

But it was very different from the joy that makes you want to impulsively break into a run or shout out loud.

It was something so foreign to him that his mind and body were slowly going out of control.

How sad was *that*?

Something *good* had happened, and he was so startled he couldn't even savor the afterglow properly.

In that sense, he was glad Kaede had wound up spending the night. He wasn't sure if he should really talk to her in this condition. No matter what they talked about, he was sure his head wouldn't be in it.

He quietly laughed at himself for this. If he let that show, the other passengers would think he was a weirdo, so he acted like nothing was going on and simply stood by the door, staring out the window. All the way to Fujisawa.

When he got off the train, he checked the clock on the platform. It was almost ten.

He avoided the line for the escalator and took the stairs instead.

Kaede was probably *still* talking to their mother. Or maybe they were getting the bath ready. They might well bathe together, like they used to.

His mind on these things, he took one step at a time.

In a single day, the two-year gap had been filled in. Kaede had connected with their mother so easily, it was like they had never been apart in the first place.

Because they were family.

"Maybe we'll end up living together again."

That day could come far faster than he thought. The warm smiles he'd seen today made it feel like that future was close at hand.

Kaede smiling, half crying. Their mother wiping the tears welling up in her eyes as she listened. With their hands clasped together, the two of them were constantly smiling, crying, then smiling again. Over and over. Their father so moved by the sight, he nearly teared up himself and grinned to hide it, then excused himself to the bathroom when that stopped working. So much warmth.

What Sakuta had seen, what he'd felt—those were family bonds.

Outside the gates, on the walk back home, even when he swung by a convenience store—the rush stayed with him.

Back in his apartment, he said, “I’m back,” and took off his shoes, feeling a little relieved. When they’d left that morning, things had been so tense—but that vibe was gone now.

Nasuno heard him enter and peeked out of the living room, meowing.

“I’m back, Nasuno. You hungry?”

“Mrow.”

He washed his hands, gargled, and moved into the living room. Nasuno was rubbing against his feet, so he poured some kibble into her bowl.

She started working her way through it, and he watched her eat for a bit, but before long, he was remembering the day he'd had and was fidgeting again.

Clearly, getting home wasn't enough to settle him down.

As if that wasn't enough proof, Mai called after her bath, and somehow they ended up talking for a full half hour. These calls never went more than ten minutes, tops.

He'd told Mai ahead of time that they were visiting his mother today, so he gave her the rundown on how it went.

He mentioned how nervous Kaede had been on the way. She'd been stressed out about the reunion since the night before, or possibly ever since it had been first mentioned.

So Sakuta had been certain there'd be a long, awkward silence once they met. He'd been wrong. Kaede hadn't needed Sakuta or their father to help; she'd dived right in, connecting with her mother again and doing everything possible to make up for the two years they'd missed.

And as he told Mai about it, the time flew by.

Mai clung to every word.

"Kaede did good," she said.

"Yeah."

"I'm glad."

This mattered to her, too. He could feel that through the phone. It was very Mai to share in this joy of his. She was just as thrilled that Kaede and her mother had made it work. And Sakuta was overjoyed that she was thinking of them.

"Sorry, Mai, I kinda rambled for a bit. Thanks, though."

"Don't worry about it. I wanted to know. Besides, I already prepped for the shoot tomorrow."

She had all her lines memorized.

"You'll be back Thursday?"

"That's the plan."

"I'll be waiting with eyes peeled."

He threw in a hint of their usual banter to wrap things up.

"Good night, Sakuta."

"Good night."

And the call came to a close.

2

Perhaps inevitably, he'd had trouble falling asleep the night before. Something deep down inside was quietly roiling, and Sakuta's mind had not

drifted into slumber until well after three.

Yet he'd woken up easily. His mind sprang to life as his alarm started ringing, and he sat right up. He reached out and shut off the racket, got out of bed, and stretched.

"Hngg—*yawn*."

Every muscle in him strained, then relaxed. Another step toward being fully conscious.

He headed to the living room, but only Nasuno was there. It was weirdly quiet. He could feel the silence on his skin.

Kaede's absence alone changed the whole feel of the apartment.

This wasn't his first time waking up alone in the house, but it had certainly not been a frequent experience, and it still felt *off*.

Normally, Kaede was here—and the other Kaede before her.

"Meow."

Nasuno rubbed up against his feet, so he gave her breakfast. Then he ate something himself. Since Kaede wasn't here, he didn't bother toasting the bread and simply bit into a whole tomato rather than cut it up. Never even got out a plate. Ate the whole thing standing in the kitchen, leaving nothing to wash up. The bread got stuck in his throat, so he did wash that down with some orange juice.

This left him with a few extra minutes, so he turned on the TV and let the morning news fill his ears, slowly getting ready for school.

He left just before eight.

He walked the usual path to the station. This morning, he was joined by a young woman in a pantsuit and a college-aged dude. They both kept checking their phones, tapping the screen, narrowly avoiding telephone poles. The college student actually did bump one and apologized to it.

Not a particularly unusual sight. An ordinary morning scene.

Sakuta would likely see similar things on the way to school tomorrow and the

day after.

He'd seen stuff like this last week, too.

Typical, ordinary, unremarkable morning sights.

A morning routine that wasn't exactly going anywhere.

But there *would* come an end to it.

A year from now, Sakuta would graduate high school. And before that happened, maybe his family would decide they should live together again. He might move out of this neighborhood sooner than later.

The apartment he and Kaede shared was too small for four. But the apartment his father was borrowing from work was not exactly any bigger.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," he said, but he couldn't stop himself from thinking about it.

Seeing Kaede and their mom together had made moving back in together seem so close he could reach out and touch it.

"Guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

If he was being honest with himself, he found it hard to imagine living anywhere else. He couldn't really picture himself and Kaede living with their parents, even though *that* had been the routine until the bullies came after her.

"What happens, happens."

Some things just worked that way. Like him and the other Kaede moving here two years ago. As time passed, living alone with his sister had become his everyday.

So even if that changed, he'd just have to live without regrets. Doing nothing out of the ordinary, just being conscious that ordinary days were the definition of happiness. As long as he remembered that, they'd be okay.

With these thoughts on his mind, Sakuta walked the ten minutes to Fujisawa Station.

He crossed the bridge from the JR station to the Enoden Fujisawa Station and boarded a train. It was full of students his age. He hung on to a strap, swaying

with the train. The Enoden moved slowly and swayed in kind. It was downright comfortable.

After Koshigoe Station, the train hit the coast.

All this time, it had been running between rows of houses, but now the view suddenly opened up, revealing the ocean before him. The morning rays bounced off the surface, making the water gleam.

He stared absently at the sea until the train reached Shichirigahama Station, where his school lay.

At this hour, pretty much only students were disembarking. Maybe a teacher or two.

The gates stood like scarecrows. He scanned his train pass, and the attendant saw them off with a friendly “Good morning.”

The path from the station to the school gates was a river of uniforms. Mingling with the flow, Sakuta crossed the bridge and the tracks, then passed through the open gate.

He saw his buddy Yuuma Kunimi by the entrance, but he was with Saki Kamisato, who hated Sakuta’s guts, so he headed to class without calling out to them.

He reached room 2-1 without speaking to anyone.

The room was already half-full, abuzz with that pre-homeroom chatter. Friends chattered away, making one another laugh.

One eye on that, Sakuta took his seat by the window. Skies were clear, and the horizon clearly defined.

When the bell rang, student athletes came running in from morning practice. Their teacher was close behind.

“Anyone not here, raise your hand,” he said, and he quickly took attendance before wrapping up morning homeroom.

The final exams of their second year had ended the week before, and all they were doing this week was getting the answer sheets back. Classes were only held in the mornings, and neither teachers nor students were particularly

motivated. They were just running out the clock to the end of the year. The whole school was in autopilot.

Sakuta would have loved to be just as lazy. But even with finals out of the way, he had to keep studying. Get himself ready for college entrance exams next year.

He took out his vocab book and started working on his daily memorization quota. He heard someone say, "Guess we'll be changing classes soon..." but wasn't sure who. Didn't really care.

It was just standard break chatter. It did occur to him that Tomoe would probably be stressing, but that thought came and went.

A normal, ordinary day. Class 2-1 was as it ever was.

And so Sakuta remained blissfully unaware of anything wrong.

The wrongness revealed itself soon after first period began.

Their English teacher passed back test sheets in order by seat number...but since Sakuta's last name was Azusagawa, he should have been first in line.

But his name never came.

".....?"

Seat number two was called first, and three and four behind it.

He was in no rush, so he figured he'd just ask later.

Eventually, all answer sheets were passed out. Some students were pleased with their scores; others were wailing, "I'm doomed!"

Sakuta stood up and approached the podium.

"You skipped me," he said.

But the teacher ignored him.

"Let's start with the first problem!" the teacher said, turning to the chalkboard. He began writing on it.

"Uh, I kinda need my test back?" Sakuta said.

Chalk in hand, the teacher turned around.

“Lots of people missed this one!” he said.

His attention was only focused on the answers and what people got wrong.

He completely ignored Sakuta’s presence. No, that wasn’t the right verb. The teacher wasn’t ignoring him. Ignoring required a conscious choice. And this was a fundamentally different problem. That was increasingly obvious.

The English teacher clearly couldn’t hear Sakuta’s voice.

Or see Sakuta at all, for that matter.

Sakuta got right up in his face, waving his hand in front of his eyes. No reaction.

He put his hand on the teacher’s shoulder, but there wasn’t so much as a flinch.

Not even a reflexive reaction.

And this wasn’t limited to the teacher. Nobody in Class 2-1 was responding to Sakuta’s actions.

“Can anyone see me?” he asked, throwing his arms out wide.

No one answered. No one made a face or laughed. Some students were diligently listening to the teacher’s explanation; others were playing with their phones under their desks. Saki Kamisato was always the first to sneer at Sakuta’s antics and outbursts, but she was simply taking notes on the problems she’d missed.

“You really can’t see or hear me, then?”

He said this louder, making sure. Loud enough to drown out their teacher—pretty much just yelling.

But still nobody noticed.

Nobody asked the teacher to repeat himself.

“What’s going on...?”

All he knew was that no one could see him.

Or hear him.

Or knew that he existed.

Exactly like the Adolescence Syndrome Mai had last year...

He had to assume that's what this was.

He wasn't rattled by the nature of the phenomenon itself. He simply had no idea why this would happen to *him*.

And that left him confused and flustered.

This was undoubtedly *some* sort of Adolescence Syndrome. He was willing to concede that point. Clearly, nobody could see him, so he was forced to accept the truth. But he had *no* clue what could have *caused* it.

All his previous experiences with Adolescence Syndrome occurred for a *reason*. That was true for Mai, Tomoe, Rio, Nodoka, both Kaedes, and Shouko.

"Did something happen to me?"

Something that might accidentally trigger Adolescence Syndrome? Something that really preyed on his mind?

"....."

He thought about it.

But literally nothing came to mind.

Like he'd said when Rio asked, Sakuta was dating the cutest girl in the whole world. And Kaede was making good progress. He had no problems. He was living a rich, fulfilling life. Sakuta should have been as far as humanly possible from Adolescence Syndrome.

Yet his predicament clearly said otherwise.

Was this something like the incident with Tomoe, where he'd been dragged into someone else's problem? He hadn't kicked any other girls' butts, though.

As Sakuta stood by the podium, thinking, the rest of the class were steadily working through the exam results.

"I'd better see how far this goes."

There might still be someone out there who could see him.

Not caring that class was in session, Sakuta opened the door and stepped out into the hall. The teacher didn't yell after him. None of his classmates sent shocked stares his way.

He calmly opened the next door over, room 2-2. He slammed it on purpose, but nobody turned toward him.

Same for 2-3, and 2-4.

Rio was listening to the physics teacher, looking rather bored. Yuuma was stifling a yawn, struggling to stay awake through the Japanese teacher's drone.

He hit up every class in his year without a single person seeing him.

"So much for that."

He left the last room, 2-9, and headed down the stairs to 1-4.

Tomoe's class. They'd kicked each other's butts before, and that gave him hope.

"Hellooo," he called, opening the door. He figured if Tomoe *could* see him, she'd be pretty shocked, so he could demonstrate some basic courtesy. But he needn't have bothered.

The first-years were no different.

No reaction at all.

Sakuta's entrance didn't make the teacher stop writing on the board, and the thirty-six first-years didn't kick up a fuss.

Tomoe was no different. Sakuta peered at her 62 percent grade, and she didn't look peeved at all. Shame.

"If Koga's out, this is pretty damn bad..."

But even as he said it, it didn't feel real.

No wave of panic hit him. It seemed too late to be all shocked.

"Well, guess I'll do what I can."

He left Tomoe's class and headed for the entrance. Outside the offices, he stretched. The staff lady was sitting at the desk behind the office window, but

she didn't look up when he passed.

You'd think wandering around the halls while classes were in session would at least earn him a query.

But he wasn't exactly here to talk to her, so he didn't mind.

He was after the phones next to her desk.

Sakuta picked up one of the receivers and dropped in a ten-yen coin. He punched in an eleven-digit number.

He'd long since learned Mai's number by heart.

He hit the last digit and put the receiver to his ear. But there was no dial tone. He hit the switch and tried again. Still nothing.

He gave Nodoka's number a shot with the same result.

The ten-yen coin went back in his pocket.

"Well, shit."

Not much else he could do now. No signs of the situation improving or even changing. He'd learned nothing and figured nothing out.

Maybe outside the school someone would see him, but he was already past being that optimistic.

Mai was in Yamanashi, filming a TV series. If he couldn't even place a call to her, there was no point hoping.

"It comes down to *why*."

If he could figure that out, a solution might present itself.

If he couldn't, there was nothing he could do.

Once again, Sakuta searched within for answers.

At the very least, everyone had seen him yesterday. He and Kaede had visited their mother, and Mai had called that evening.

The change had happened overnight.

Had anything changed in that time?

“.....”

There was *one* thing that came to mind.

One big change yesterday.

His family reunited after two long years.

Quite frankly, there were few things in life that were quite that big a deal.

But he couldn't see a connection to this Adolescence Syndrome. A family coming back together was certainly a major trigger. They'd taken that step the day before.

And how was that a bad thing?

After two long years, all the problems he, Kaede, and their parents had were finally moving toward a real resolution. Kaede had worked real hard for it, and their mother had likely overcome her own share of struggles. Sakuta and their father had helped them through it. Hoping their family could be together again someday, taking it one day at a time...

And their wishes had finally started to come true.

Sakuta just couldn't imagine that would lead to Adolescence Syndrome.

But it was also true nothing else had happened to him.

Emotions aside, based purely on the facts at hand...that was definitely the biggest difference between yesterday and today.

They'd met their mother.

“...I'd better go.”

Staying at school was not improving anything. He was out of options here.

Kaede must still be with their mother. He'd have to check if she could see him.

Sakuta went back up to 2-1. The English teacher was still going over exam problems, but he sailed right past him and grabbed his bag.

“Leaving early,” he said and then was out the door.

At the lockers, he changed into his shoes. He put his school slippers inside,

closed the door, and felt a shiver run through his gut.

He was all tensed up.

But why...?

“.....”

Sakuta didn't voice the answer, not because he didn't find one, but because he found it already waiting inside him.

——Meeting his mom made him anxious.

He let that echo through his mind. His body had already known. He could feel the shock waves spreading out through him. Rushing through every inch of him, like they were carried through his veins. Weighing him down.

He could feel his field of vision narrowing.

It was hard to breathe.

Turning his eyes away from the emotions that bound him, Sakuta started walking.

3

The train from Fujisawa Station was so empty, almost no one was standing up. The morning rush had passed, but it was too early for lunch.

The vibe on board was real laid-back.

Sakuta was the only one standing up in his car. There were still empty seats around, and he could easily have found a place to sit. Everyone loved sitting in corners, but there were still a few available.

But he never considered it.

He was too nervous.

He huddled at the edge of the doorframe, watching the landscape scroll by. Doing his best to focus his mind outward.

Digging deeper inside himself would mean facing the stress in the pit of his stomach. Would mean figuring out just what *that* was.

But staring out the window wasn't enough to make him forget how nervous he was about seeing his mother again.

The proof? In his pocket, Sakuta's hand was clenched tight around the key. The one his father had given him before he left last night. He'd stuck it in his key holder with the key to their Fujisawa apartment, to make sure he didn't lose it.

He realized he had a death grip on the key when the train reached Yokohama Station and he got out. He'd tried to switch to his train pass and found the impression of the key imprinted on his palm. It was hard not to notice.

Like the day before, he rode the Keihin-Tohoko Line for a single station, then switched to the Yokohama Line at Higashi-Kanagawa. Only ten more minutes to his destination.

This car was even emptier than the one on the Tokaido Line, but once more, he didn't consider sitting down. The tension in his guts was too constricting, and he thought standing made him feel marginally better.

The train made several stops, but few people got on or off. With no signs of any hustle or bustle, the train reached Kozukue Station.

The doors opened, and he slipped out through the gap, the first to disembark. He ran down the stairs, reaching the gates before anyone else.

Out the south entrance, down to the main throughfare, then along that for a while.

This was the path he'd taken yesterday.

He'd been nervous then, too.

But nothing like this.

He could feel his breath growing short as he neared the house.

Air came in and in, but he got no oxygen from it.

He couldn't inhale more without exhaling, and that frustrated him, throwing the whole rhythm of his breathing off.

He walked slower, trying to get his emotions under control, but his legs felt funny, and he could barely walk. Like this wasn't his body. Almost like someone

else was in control.

He saw the landmark and turned right into the alley. Five more yards, and he'd reach the building his father lived in. He could see the walls already.

Four more yards. Three. Two... He could see in the entrance now. And there...

".....Ah!"

A gasp of surprise escaped his lips.

People were coming out of the building. Two of them. He knew them both.

One was Kaede.

And the other was their mother.

Kaede was clinging to their mother's arm, chattering away.

She seemed to be having a great time. Grinning her head off.

Their mother was smiling, too.

They must've been going shopping. They turned toward Sakuta as they approached the main road.

Once they got closer, he could hear them.

"For croquettes, you start by boiling potatoes, right?"

"Yes, and once they're fully cooked, you mix them with sautéed ground beef and onions."

They were almost on him.

"It's a lot of work?"

"But I've got you to help me today, Kaede."

"R-right! I'll do what I can!"

They were right here. Less than three yards away.

Sakuta was standing stock-still in the middle of the alley. No matter how into the topic they were, if they could see him at all, they would have by now. They'd have looked his way. It would be downright weird not to.

There was no one here but the three of them. Kaede and their mother

weren't exactly blending into the background, and neither was Sakuta.

But they just brushed right past him, chatting about croquettes. So smoothly, it was like he didn't exist at all.

He turned, watching them move away.

His mouth opened, trying to call after them.

“.....”

But no words formed. He couldn't bring himself to say their names.

He just stood there in the middle of the alley, watching his sister and mother round the corner and vanish from his sight. Just watched them go.

That was when the fear hit him. He could feel tendrils of it growing in the pit of his stomach, entwining themselves throughout his body.

Trying to shake that off, he turned back to the old workers' housing. Taking the stairs two at a time to the third floor.

He only stopped running when he was outside the door marked AZUSAGAWA.

Breathing heavily, he used the key his father had given him the day before. Dragging his tired legs inside, he cast off his shoes. Couldn't be bothered to line them up.

He'd just been here yesterday.

The four of them had sat in this living room.

Together for the first time in two years.

Yesterday the room had smelled unfamiliar, but today it was the opposite.

They'd been a warm, loving family again.

For one day only, but a day that mattered.

He refused to believe *that* was the cause. A moment like that would never trigger Adolescence Syndrome.

And yet he also couldn't imagine what *else* might be behind this.

What happened must have been yesterday—when they'd seen their mother again.

Feeling a pang of guilt, like he was sneaking into a stranger's house, he opened a set of sliding doors and entered the next room over.

A bare-bones room, with a tatami floor.

A pair of futons folded in the corner. This must've been where Kaede and their mother had slept.

The only other thing here was an old dresser with a mirror on top.

Sakuta found a notebook in front of the mirror. The same kind he used at school. Your standard college-ruled notebook.

There was nothing on the cover, so he had no idea what was inside until he opened it.

But the moment he did, he knew it was their mother's diary.

Neat letters on every page, in a hand he barely recognized.

The first entry was more than two years old. The dates jumped a lot, leaving gaps as long as a month.

The length of the entries varied, too. Some filled the page, some ended after a line or two. Those were the majority.

Kaede's getting bullied, and I can't do anything.

I'm failing my own daughter.

That was the first page.

And it hit him hard.

Sakuta had never heard what she felt or thought in her own words. Given the symptoms of Kaede's Adolescence Syndrome, there wasn't really time to casually sit and talk things over.

So only now, with it right here in plain words...did the sheer weight of it hit him.

Every entry was filled with regret, showing how their mother had been at a complete loss as to how to help Kaede.

The first half of the notebook was relentlessly bleak.

I was never a mother.

What would lead someone to write that?

There was nothing before or after it. A lump stuck in his throat. Sakuta felt like something was reaching up from the floor, threatening to drag him down.

I told Kaede it would all be okay.

Nothing is okay. But what else could I say?

I'm a horrible mother.

Every word felt like a stake through the heart. A pain in his chest that echoed through his whole body.

But he didn't tear his eyes away. Didn't stop himself from reading more. Perhaps *couldn't* would be more accurate.

For the simple reason that he'd reached the back half, and the entries began to change.

I miss Kaede.

I want to tell her how sorry I am.

To be a proper mother to her.

And Sakuta wanted to know more about these feelings. If only to ease the remorse he felt for sneaking a peek at his mother's darkest moments. In the hopes of ending things on a brighter note.

But he was also motivated by a very different emotion. His own negative feelings.

Something had grown all too obvious.

A clear concern born from the words in the back half.

Something his mother's diary never mentioned.

Not even once.

At first, it was a small doubt, but the more he read, the stronger it got. When he hit March 15—yesterday—it became a certainty.

Kaede's become such a wonderful girl.

She's really grown up.

I'm so happy.

This time, I'm going to be a mother to her.

Kaede said we could do it together.

The three of us, living together. I'd love that.

I'll have to make it happen.

"....."

He didn't know what to say.

He wasn't *feeling* much of anything.

There was a name his mother's diary had never once mentioned.

And that name was Sakuta.

He wasn't sure when that had started.

But seeing this, it made things obvious.

Yesterday.

He hadn't been imagining it.

It wasn't no coincidence. It hadn't just *happened*.

He'd noticed now. He knew.

The truth.

All day long, her eyes had never once met his.

Not even *once*.

Her eyes never saw him.

Her smile never once turned his way.

Every smile their mother managed had been for Kaede or their father.

"...That explains it."

A chill ran down his spine.

His heart shaking, shivering in the cold.

Not because his mother couldn't perceive him.

That wasn't *that* big a deal.

What truly scared Sakuta was that they'd been together for hours, and he hadn't even *noticed* that she never once said his name. He'd been there, acting like part of the family, without once realizing that his own mother couldn't see him.

How long had it been like that?

Since she last perceived him?

Since she forgot he existed?

And he'd been acting normal, unaware that was even a thing.

Convinced he was *happy*.

It didn't matter how long.

There was no use wondering about the past.

What mattered was *now*.

How did *he* feel about his mother?

What emotions did Sakuta have?

That felt like a much bigger deal.

Nodoka had asked him once.

———“*How do you feel about your mom?*”

Sakuta had given her some sort of answer. Probably something dumb like “I think she's my mom.” And he'd meant it at the time. He hadn't been lying to her.

———“*There's gotta be more. Love 'em, hate 'em, can't stand 'em, wish they'd get off your back, et cetera.*”

He'd said, “Probably all of those.” Nodoka had been dealing with her own mom-based issues, so he'd almost certainly been playing to that.

But that wasn't all.

He could only admit loving or hating someone after *genuinely* feeling that way. After those emotions had passed through him. Gone out the other end and been left behind in the past.

At best, Sakuta had already gotten over his mother's absence. But that likely wasn't the truth. It was more like...he'd compartmentalized it. Convinced himself to give up.

He and the new Kaede had moved to Fujisawa, and fending for themselves was all he could handle. He'd made up his mind there was nothing he could do about their mother's condition, and he sealed away every thought of it. Unconsciously cutting her loose. Abandoning her.

And two years later, his mother's absence was *normal* for him. He'd gotten used to it, even found it comfortable.

That was why he'd had no clue how to come back. How to talk to her again. He didn't have those answers. And *that* was why this was happening to him.

And she couldn't even see him. Couldn't tell he was there. The world had taken stock of their problem and altered itself accordingly. Now *nobody* could tell Sakuta was there.

Proving that his mother's perceptions weren't wrong. Making it so his relationship with her was free of all deception.

She'd brought Sakuta into this world.

And if she couldn't perceive him, that arguably meant he really didn't exist.

A stabbing pain ran through his side. Right where his new scar wound around his flank. He rolled up his shirt, and that white mark was still there, from his side to his belly button.

Or maybe the other way around. Given the situation, it probably started at the belly button.

Where he'd been linked to his mother at birth.

He touched it but felt nothing, like the pain was all in his mind.

Before his darker thoughts could swallow him any further, he quietly closed his mother's diary. He put it back by the mirror where he'd found it.

“This is so not funny,” he said, but he couldn’t help but laugh.

He let out a long, long breath, one with no clear emotion behind it. It didn’t even count as a sigh. It was just an exhalation.

His heart was silent.

Like it wasn’t even beating.

He’d felt like he was handling their life in Fujisawa pretty well. Living apart from his parents, away from the only home he’d ever known, starting over in a place where they knew nobody. Maybe he hadn’t gotten everything right, but he’d given himself a passing grade.

He’d done well.

And never doubted that.

But there’d been a sacrifice behind that self-satisfaction. He’d earned that passing grade at the expense of his mother’s existence.

“...Can you blame me?”

What choice had he had?

His emotions were a pitch-black vortex. Whirling around his insides, they tormented him, keeping him stuck in place.

This wasn’t regret over the choices he’d made. He’d done everything he could. He’d suffered, agonized, and cried over what he couldn’t do, but Sakuta knew he’d accepted that, gotten over it, and become who he was today.

He’d learned that true happiness lay in the little joys of life and begun striving toward kindness. He knew what mattered and had people who mattered to him.

But now he’d learned that might have been a mistake, and having that error shoved in his face was not something he could just accept.

He wanted to believe he’d made the right choice, that he’d done nothing wrong. But he felt like that desire was a sign of a deeper flaw, and it unsettled him.

To approve of his own actions meant accepting that he’d cut his mother

loose.

“.....”

Sorting out his emotions was impossible. Fully coming to terms with either side of this issue was beyond him at the moment. He couldn't decide which way to go, and his feet stayed glued to the tatami.

Eventually, there was a noise from the entrance. A click of a lock turning, and a voice calling, “We're home.”

Kaede came in, grocery bags rustling.

Sakuta went back into the living room and found his mother and sister setting laden grocery bags down on the dining room table.

“That was so heavy, Kaede. Are your arms okay?”

“I can handle it!”

“You've gotten strong.”

“Anyone my age can carry this much!”

The bags were full of potatoes, ground meat, and onions. And bread crumbs, flour, eggs, *tonkatsu* sauce, even lettuce and tomatoes. Their mother was already telling Kaede what needed to go in the fridge.

Once they'd put everything away, she said, “Should we get started?”

“Okay!”

Kaede was all smiles, and their mother put an apron on her.

“I can tie it myself!” Kaede protested, but she didn't try to stop her.

They started cooking.

Ingredients for croquettes had to be prepared.

First, they washed and peeled the potatoes. Kaede used a peeler while their mother smoothly peeled the whole skin in one go with a knife.

“You're so good at this, Mom!”

Kaede was comparing her own work with her mom's. Her potato was all bumpy.

“If you practice, you’ll get this good in no time.”

Their mother smiled, pleased by the praise.

Once the potatoes were peeled, they chopped them into chunks so they’d cook through, then put them in a bowl of cold water.

“Why do we do this?”

“It makes them taste better.”

“Huh.”

While the potatoes were soaking, they chopped the onions and fried those up with the ground beef.

Once that was done, they boiled the potatoes. When the potatoes were fully cooked, they used a big spoon to crush them. Kaede kept going, “They’re so hot!” It was plain to see that she was having fun.

Once they mixed in the meat and onions, the croquette filling was complete. Now they just had to ball that up, coat it, and deep-fry it.

As they worked, their conversation never faltered. Kaede had never made croquettes before and was struggling, but their mother kept smiling and coaching her through it. Anyone could see how close they were.

Sakuta watched the whole thing from the living room. Neither of them ever noticed he was there.

They got the rice cooker going, made a salad, had everything ready for dinner—but never spotted him.

It was the same when Kaede was helping take in the laundry from the rack on the balcony. They sat together, watching the evening news and waiting for Kaede and Sakuta’s father to get home, without either of them realizing Sakuta existed. Neither of them ever mentioned him.

Their dad got back just past six. The three of them sat down at the dining room table together and ate croquettes.

“They’re good.”

“They are!”

“Kaede worked real hard on them.”

Everyone had a good time. Nobody said anything so funny they had to laugh out loud, but their dad, their mom, and Kaede all enjoyed themselves, smiling happily the whole time.

They were the kind of ideal family you would see in a refrigerator commercial. Sakuta had long hoped they could be like this again one day.

Only one thing was wrong with it.

Sakuta had no place here. And that made all the difference.

“.....”

Without a word, he left the living room. He didn’t know what to say.

He put his shoes on.

He opened the door quietly and left without his family noticing.

As the door closed behind him, he heard laughter from the living room.

He took the key out of his pocket and put it in the lock.

For a second, he hesitated—then he turned the key, as if locking something away inside his heart.

It made a metallic click.

4

White surf rolled in on a shore bathed in pale moonlight. The water growled like a low groan, trying to drag anyone who came near out to sea. The beach at night was a special kind of creepy.

The polar opposite of the glittering waters he’d seen through the window that morning. This was still Shichirigahama, but it seemed like a totally different place.

Sakuta didn’t really remember how he’d made it here from his father’s place. But the last two years had given him homing instincts, and his feet had naturally led him back.

This was home to him. Where he belonged. The home where he wanted to be.

“And maybe that’s why Mom forgot me.”

He made a face, scowling at himself.

All that time he’d spent trying not to think about her.

Trying to forget and be happy.

And this was the result.

Dad, Mom, and Kaede. A happy family of three.

Seeing that had made him run.

An extra-large wave rolled in. It came all the way up the sand to Sakuta’s toes. He didn’t jump back, not bothering to take a step back to safety. Little things like that weren’t enough to bother him now.

His heart was as deep a blue as the ocean at night.

Even on a normal day, this view would seem sad, and possibly scary. Even to Sakuta. But today was different.

Watching the nighttime surf was calming him down. It felt like he was melting into the endless blue. It felt good.

Wrapping himself in cold.

Like a chill embrace.

And by letting that happen, he didn’t have to think anymore.

Sakuta offered up his emotions to the ocean as a whole. The swirl of dank emotions washed away, given a new home.

His heart had been weighed down by dirty water, but sitting here cleaned all that out, leaving him with one thought.

The smile of the one he loved.

Okay, she wasn’t actually smiling. She was kinda mad at him. Possibly rebuking him for not going to see her.

“I miss Mai,” he said, giving voice to the emotion.

And then—

“Are you lost, mister?”

A voice behind him.

“.....?”

Baffled, he turned around.

There stood a little girl in a red leather knapsack.

She looked just like Mai.

The same girl he’d met on March 1.

“I’m not exactly lost,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I didn’t expect that question.”

“.....?” She just crooked her head.

“Are you sure *you’re* not lost?” he asked.

“Why would I be?”

“I mean, it’s kinda late for a kid your age to be wandering around alone.”

“I’m with you, so I’m not alone.”

This kid logic wasn’t all that funny, but Sakuta broke into a laugh anyway. Then he realized this was his first time talking to anybody all day, and it was a surprisingly huge relief. This, too, was a bizarre phenomenon, and perhaps laughter was an appropriate reaction.

“You can see me,” he said.

“Are you invisible?”

“Apparently.”

“I knew you were lost!”

This time he didn’t argue the point. *Lost* was certainly one word for it. He had no destination in mind and no clear idea where home was.

“Lost in life.”

“Then I’ll go home with you.”

He wasn’t sure how that followed, but before he could ask, she put her hand in his. Her little fingers squeezing Sakuta’s hand.

He could feel the warmth of her palm. Human warmth. He could feel the heat of her body, the soft touch of her skin on his. Her little hand proved that he was still alive.

And the sea breeze felt much stronger. And the scent of the salt grew as well.

“C’mon.”

Heedless of his thoughts, the girl pulled his hand. Sakuta didn’t resist. He took a step. Two, then three, matching the girl’s pace.

They reached the stairs and climbed up to the road above. They crossed at the light and walked away from the water, to Shichirigahama Station.

They waited for a bit, and when a train arrived, the girl got on. It was past ten, and the train was pretty empty. The girl pulled him to a bench, and they sat down together.

She never let go.

The other passengers still couldn’t see Sakuta, so no one looked at him funny for being with a little kid.

The train ran slowly along the coastal tracks. The car swayed pleasantly. His eyes started to close.

He’d gone to school and then to see his mom and Kaede. Now he just had to go back home. In two more hours, the day would end. He was tired.

They’d be getting off at the end of the line, Fujisawa Station.

There was no risk of sleeping through it.

And with that thought, his mind slipped closer and closer toward slumber.

He’d have to stop at the convenience store on the walk from the station. Buy some dinner. Enough for this girl, too.

Then tomorrow he’d go see her.

Even as his mind drifted off, Sakuta thought about Mai.

And that was the last thought he had.

But the train he was riding never made it to Fujisawa Station.

Or at least, Sakuta never did.

When he woke up, Sakuta wasn't on a train.

He was in a warm bed.

Character
Profile

Famous Actress /
Bunny-Girl Senpai

Mai Sakurajima

Popular across the nation,
she's a third-year at
Minegahara High and
Sakuta's girlfriend.



A Dream of Happiness

1

“...kuta.”

A voice.

“...Sakuta.”

Someone calling for him?

“Sakuta, it’s morning.”

Wait, he knew that childish voice. It was his sister’s.

And that made his mind snap awake. Made him sit right up.

“Eep!”

This also knocked Kaede off the bed. She landed on her butt.

“You’ve gotta sit up *slower*,” she wailed, scrambling to her feet and rubbing her backside. Her cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk eating sunflower seeds, only filled with complaints about Sakuta. “Hngg!” she said, glaring at him.

“.....”

Sakuta just sat in bed, gaping at her. Looking her over.

“Wh-what is it, Sakuta?” she asked, unable to bear his silent stare.

“.....You are...Kaede, right?”

He could tell that much by looking at her, but he had to ask.

“Who else?” she asked, clueless. She tilted her head to one side, baffled. A look of concern filled her eyes.

“You can see me?”

“What are you even talking about?”

She was even more lost now, and her brow began to furrow. But then another voice cut in.

“Kaede, is he up yet?”

He'd heard the voice from the hall before, but it took a long time before his brain processed it, and he realized it was their mother's. And that realization left him even *more* at sea.

"What the...?"

His thoughts spilled out of him.

What was going on?

"Kaede!" their mother called again.

"He's up, but *super* out of it!" Kaede said, slippers flapping as she left the room.

Leaving him with so many questions.

For now, he got out of bed and looked around the room.

This wasn't his room, and yet...it clearly belonged to him. This wasn't the apartment in Fujisawa. It looked more like the place in Yokohama where they'd lived until he graduated junior high. It *was* that place.

The wood-framed bed that squeaked when he rolled over. A desk that was almost the same color. Navy curtains, faded in the sunlight. Gray carpet, on the hard side.

The sheets and pillowcases had been replaced, but the rest was just how he remembered it. Even where the furniture was—just like it had been back in the day.

Like a trip down memory lane.

But he sure wasn't basking in nostalgia.

"How is this possible?"

He was too busy boggling at this turn of events to feel anything else.

This was all wrong.

The last thing he remembered was riding the Enoden. He'd boarded the train at Shichirigahama with the girl who looked like Mai—he remembered that much.

No one else had been able to see him. His own mother had forgotten he existed. And he'd never noticed. He'd just been living his life like everything was fine. And the truth had hit him hard.

He'd been all depressed about it...

But this new twist was too baffling, and he didn't have time to feel sorry for himself.

What was even happening?

Was this a dream?

That would explain a lot, but this didn't really *seem* like a dream. It was all too real. He could feel the air on his skin, smell everything. No way was he dreaming. But what else could it be?

His thoughts were going in circles.

And while he was stuck on the first question, Kaede called out again.

"Sakuta! Hurry up!" She was back in his doorway. "Breakfast's ready!"

She came right on in, grabbed his hand, and pulled. That sensation also felt too real, and he was forced to abandon his dream theory entirely.

Mind still spinning, he followed Kaede out. She pulled him to a long dining table laden with food. Toast, eggs, salad, and their mother was bringing over a plate of croquettes she'd been heating in the microwave. Leftovers from last night.

Their dad was already seated, and Kaede sat down across from him. Sakuta took a seat next to her, and their mother took the last chair across from him.

Everyone sat right where they used to. Just like before. The table and chairs were exactly as he remembered them. His back and butt knew exactly how these chairs felt.

"Time to eat," their mother said, putting her palms together.

"Good," Kaede and their father said.

"Yeah," Sakuta managed softly.

"Mom, I wanna make a croquette sandwich!" Kaede announced.

Their mother grabbed some untoasted bread, stuck a whole croquette in the middle, and handed it to Kaede. She opened wide and took a big bite.

Their father was reading the newspaper on his tablet, sipping at a steaming cup of coffee.

“Dear, we’re eating,” their mother said, glaring at the intruding device. Their dad quickly switched it off.

“Dad got scolded!” Kaede said.

Their father laughed. Like even that was fun. Everyone was enjoying their morning.

And Sakuta just watched everyone else, like an observer in a dream.

Knowing this wasn’t a dream.

His senses told him that.

He knew full well this was real.

The smell of the coffee told him that, and so did the feel of the butter melting on the toast. This could only happen in reality.

When he stared at his toast, not eating, their mother asked, “What’s wrong, Sakuta?”

“.....Hmm?”

He looked up. She was right across from him, and their eyes met. She took a sip of coffee—with a *lot* of milk in it—and said, “Oh, that’s good.”

Her eyes on him. Clearly perceiving him. Seeing him.

“You feeling okay?”

“.....Yeah, I’m fine.”

Sakuta looked down, fleeing the eye contact.

“Sakuta, are you *still* zoned out?” Kaede asked.

“Better eat up, or you’ll be late,” their mother added.

“.....Late? It’s only just past seven,” he said. The clock said 7:10.

“Wow, you *are* out of it,” their mother laughed. “You leave at half past, right?”

That had to mean seven thirty.

“Uh, I guess?” he said.

If this really was their old apartment, then they were in Yokohama, pretty far from the water’s edge. And by *late*, they must have meant for high school...so which school was he going to?

“Your school is so far away.”

“Is it?”

“Minegahara is nowhere near here!”

Sakuta was a bit relieved to hear that name. Everything else was shrouded in mystery, but at least he knew what school he went to. And it was the same one.

“You’ll be going there in April, Kaede,” their father said. “Make sure you’re ready.”

Wait, Kaede was also going there? Really?

Apparently so.

“I should have picked somewhere closer...”

She wasn’t even making the commute yet, but Kaede already sounded tired.

Sakuta didn’t have it in him to respond. Everything was too different. But *some* things hadn’t changed. If he was still going to Minegahara...

Then at least some things matched what he knew. Still, the differences outweighed them. Their mother was clearly doing great. She could see Sakuta; they all lived together. Same for Kaede.

All four of them were here. All around the breakfast table, eating together.

This place had everything he’d lost.

He could tell that much, but he had no idea why this was happening. What any of this meant.

“Sakuta, seriously, are you okay?”

He'd stopped eating again, and it seemed his mother was starting to worry.

".....I said I'm fine."

Sakuta shoved toast in his mouth, washed it down with milk, and swallowed his egg in two bites.

"Thanks," he said, and he stood up.

In his room, he opened his closet doors. A Minegahara uniform hung on a hanger.

He shucked off the sweats he'd slept in—and saw the scar on his belly. That white mark running along his side. It was still with him. Just as he remembered it.

"So this is still ongoing."

Ironic. A wound he didn't understand felt like an anchor of reality in the midst of this baffling situation.

He slipped on his uniform trousers and did up the buttons on the shirt. He put his blazer on over that, double-checked the contents of his backpack, and was ready to go.

"I'm outta here," he called.

Everyone else was still eating.

"Oh! Sakuta, your lunch!" their mother said, chasing after him.

He'd already got his shoes on, so he took the lunch from her hands.

"Thanks," he said. It came out naturally, but his mother looked surprised. "What?" he asked.

"You almost never thank me."

"Really?"

His gaze got shifty. Had he messed up? But his mother seemed to take that as embarrassment, and her grin got real wide.

"Uh, I'd better go."

"Take care."

“Oh! Sakuta, good-bye!” Kaede called. She came toward the entrance, carrying Nasuno.

Sakuta waved and left. He headed down the stairs. This was all so strange.

Outside the building, he turned back and looked up at it. Five stories of poured concrete. A square building, with identical balconies. Just as he remembered it.

This was definitely the place they’d lived until his third year of junior high. The same quiet neighborhood.

It had been a while since construction ended, and the asphalt beneath his feet was faded. But the elms along the road had filled in nicely.

The building’s parking lot. Roofs over the spots. Worn-out cars, bikes so old and rusted it was hard to believe anyone used them.

Everything exactly like his memories.

“One thing after another...”

March had been too busy.

The girl who looked like Mai, the scar on his side, nobody able to see him... and now this.

Adolescence Syndrome clearly had a thing for him.

“Gimme a break.”

He’d earned the right to grumble.

“A break from what?”

Sakuta jumped. He’d thought he was alone. He turned toward the voice.

It was Kaede’s classmate, Kotomi Kano.

She has tracksuit pants on and a long-sleeved T-shirt. She saw him scoping that out, turned red, and started making excuses. “I was taking out the trash. Didn’t think I’d run into you. I don’t usually go out dressed like this, I promise.”

“Well, good on you for helping with the housework,” he said.

“Do you think I’m still twelve?” Kotomi said, pursing her lips at him.

“Sorry, that’s fair.”

“It’s fine.”

She was still sulking a bit. Apparently, it wasn’t fine.

“Oh, right, Kano...”

“Yes?”

Trying to change gears, he started to ask a question, and she almost immediately switched over to “earnest” mode.

“About Kaede.”

“What about Kae?”

“The bully thing...”

He had to be vague. He wasn’t sure exactly where things lay.

“Nothing happened since,” Kotomi said, smiling. “She’s got a shot to graduation.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. All thanks to you.”

“Huh.”

What had he done?

“I’ll admit, occupying the broadcast booth was pretty badass.”

“Oh, right.”

Clearly, he hadn’t played it safe. *Occupy* was a *loaded* word.

“Kae mentions it sometimes. ‘Thank god Sakuta is my brother.’”

“And she didn’t say not to tell me?”

“So don’t you dare tell her I did.”

She put on an unconvincing glare. Then she started laughing. For a serious girl, she certainly had goofy side.

“You good on time? Don’t let me make you late.”

She turned and darted inside before he could say anything else.

It would never do to be late after his sister's friend looked out for him. There was still a lot he wanted to ask about, but he headed toward the station, mulling it all over.

He got on the crowded morning train and reached Fujisawa just after eight. He exited the Odakyu Enoshima Line gates and was relieved to see the rest of the station looking familiar. This was where he always wound up in the morning, so it felt like home.

But this wasn't his destination. To get to Minegahara, he'd have to change here to the Enoden.

He took the stairs to the connective bridge.

As he did, someone called his name.

A blond girl his age had crossed his path. Nodoka.

".....Yo," he said, unsure what their exact relationship was here.

"Why you acting weirdly dodgy?" Nodoka growled, sensing his ambivalence.

"I thought I was being mugged."

"Oh, please."

"Your whole vibe just screams 'hooligan.'"

"That's not even a thing!"

News to Sakuta. But fair enough, it had been a while since he'd seen anyone jerk a thumb at an alley and say, "Gimme your wallet." Maybe it was just an urban legend.

"No school, Toyohama?" he asked. She wasn't wearing a uniform.

"Gotta get to a photo session for some cover, so I'm out today. Argh, time for my train—catch ya later."

With that, she turned and ran off.

"Oh, wait!" he yelled, but she never even turned around, vanishing through the JR gates. "I still had questions..."

This had made it clear he *did* know Nodoka.

But he'd missed his chance to ask the big question.

To ask about Mai.

If he knew Nodoka, he almost certainly had *some* contact with her. But he had to know if they were still dating.

That was critical.

But with Nodoka in the wind, there was no point standing still. And it was nearly time for his train, too. He hustled toward the Enoden platform.

When he made it through the gates, he saw the train waiting for him. The warning bell was ringing, so he jumped through the doors of the closest car. If he missed this train, he'd never get to school on time.

The doors closed, and the train pulled out. Slowly but surely, they were on their way. The rhythm of the train's swaying was steeped into his body, and the sounds of the tracks underneath were music to his ears.

Sakuta rode the Enoden almost every day.

This morning had been nothing but weird. Especially the fact that he still lived in Yokohama with his parents and Kaede.

Based on what Kotomi had said, everything was the same right up until Kaede's bullying started. That's where things diverged.

Somehow, here—that bullying hadn't split his family apart. Sakuta had found a way to stop it. By occupying the broadcast room, apparently.

And his mother hadn't lost confidence in her parenting skills, never had a nervous breakdown, never moved into the hospital.

That was the world he found himself in.

".....It seems so far-fetched."

He was trying to reject the idea, but he couldn't think of any other explanation. He *had* to accept the truth. But it wasn't as simple as going, "Right, okay, cool."

And so he spent the whole ride to Shichirigahama thinking. But his thoughts

did not get him to any alternatives.

When the train reached the station, a flood of students emerged, all in matching uniforms. Sakuta was but one in the crowd.

As he headed for the gate, a familiar face got off the car in front of him. A petite girl with short, fluffy hair.

She saw Sakuta and raised a brow. She turned her face away—but pulled up alongside him.

“Morning, senpai.”

“Morning.”

Clearly, he was still friends with Tomoe.

“.....”

“.....”

When he just wordlessly stared at her, she looked disgruntled and said, “That’s it?”

“Would you have preferred the ‘You’re cute again today!’ treatment?”

“I—I didn’t mean it like that!”

Her whole back stretched out as she leaned forward aggressively, protesting with every inch of her body.

“Then what?”

“You *always* say something unnecessary, so I was wondering if you were sick.”

Weird metric for concern. He wasn’t sure how to take that. But if she was worried, he should be grateful.

“Well, thanks,” he deadpanned.

“You so don’t mean that!”

Not his fault. But he’d said the right thing, so it oughtta count.

“And you’ve got a girlfriend, so you’re not allowed to go around calling other girls cute. And Sakurajima’s way cuter, so it doesn’t even sound true.”

She grumbled her way through a list of gripes. Loud enough that he could hear.

“Well, she is my Mai.”

It sounded like he *was* still dating Mai. This was a huge relief.

But that also made this all feel *too* perfect. Everything seemed to be just the way he’d wanted it.

They left the station.

“Oh, Nana!” Tomoe said, looking at someone ten yards ahead.

Sakuta looked up and saw Tomoe’s friend Nana Yoneyama up ahead.

“See you this evening.”

“For what?”

Had he agreed to meet?

“Work? You’ve got a shift.”

“I knew that,” he said, clearly lying.

“You start at four. If you forget, the boss’ll be livid!”

She waved a hand and ran off to catch up with Nana. When she did, she said, “Morning!” and Nana answered with a smile. They were talking and laughing. Both of them.

It was a happy, peaceful morning.

Everyone was acting normal. Chatting with friends, goofing around, boys being extra dumb.

Sakuta was the only one overtly observing things. Everyone else was just living.

Inside the school gates, everything remained normal. No one seemed to have any doubts about the nature of the world, and everyone seemed to know he was there.

As he got his slippers out of the shoe locker, he was greeted by a pleasant voice.

Sakuta looked up and was unsurprised to see Yuuma Kunimi standing there, in shorts and a T-shirt.

“Sup. Morning practice today?”

“Yep, and tomorrow, and the next day.”

“And yet you’re still smiling.”

This guy always wore that comfortable smile, no matter what.

They changed into indoor slippers and started walking.

“Sakuta, you working today?”

“I am.”

“What time?”

“Four, apparently.”

“You learned this secondhand?”

“Koga told me.”

“You sure are close!”

They went up the stairs to the second-year classrooms, chatting. Their words weren’t entirely purposeless but weren’t particularly purposeful, either.

As they made the turn at the landing, a voice called, “Azusagawa.”

Wondering who that was, he turned around. The voice alone had not clued him in.

“...Um,” he said, at a loss.

He didn’t recognize the girl on the stairs below.

She was five foot three, with very black hair. Didn’t look like she’d *ever* dyed it. It was cut just long enough to brush against her shoulders. Her skirt was longer than average—which just meant regulation length. Not a single piece of her uniform was out of place, as if she’d just stepped out of the school brochure. It had the combined effect of making her seem all-business. Her eyes were peering up at Sakuta through thin-framed spectacles.

“You’re on duty today,” she said, slowly catching up. “Here.”

She handed him the class log.

Only one way he could react. He took it from her.

“Thanks,” he said.

She looked extremely evasive. “The bell’s about to ring,” she said, and she ran on up the stairs, then vanished around the corner.

“Uh, Kunimi...”

“Mm?”

“Who was that?”

“Huh? Akagi’s in your class. First name’s...Ikumi, I think?”

“Yeah?”

“Good lord, man. Are you doing okay? You said you even went to junior high together!”

“Oh, right.”

This came as a surprise, but Sakuta tried not to let it show.

“You ain’t right, Sakuta.”

“I’m always like this.”

Before Yuuma could prod further, he headed toward class. His thoughts were now entirely on that girl—Ikumi Akagi.

She had *not* been in the Minegahara he knew.

Sakuta’s primary motivation for sitting exams here had been finding a school nowhere close to his old home. Kaede’s bully problem had wrecked so many things—he’d lost every friend he had.

He’d specifically chosen this school because no one from junior high would go here.

But in this baffling new world, someone was. And she was even in his class.

Ikumi Akagi.

He ran the name through his mind again.

He was pretty sure she *had* been in his class back in the day.

Only during his third year. She'd probably been class president or on the discipline committee—something like that anyway.

Not the type to hang with the guys—and frankly, she seemed a little on edge just talking to them. She hadn't really been the center of attention, and that's probably the reason he'd remembered her at all. That type.

"Sakuta," Yuuma said gravely. "You know Akagi's..."

This seemed awkward for him to say, and he ended up not saying it.

"What?"

"Well, if you don't know, best not to say."

"Huh?"

The bell rang.

"Whoops, time to go. Bye."

Yuuma ran off toward his own class. Sakuta watched him go.

"Is this the butterfly effect?" he muttered.

Maybe if he was still living with his family, old classmates would have joined him at Minegahara.

2

For the most part, 2-1 was the same set of faces.

This was the class Sakuta knew.

Only Ikumi Akagi was different.

Sakuta's stock hadn't gone up, either. Yuuma's girlfriend, Saki Kamisato, still had it in for him, and the rest of the class generally kept their distance.

Over the first few hours, he had a pretty good idea why.

This was all because of the junior high hospitalization incident. The truth seemed to be the broadcast booth occupation Kotomi had mentioned, but the

story got inflated until he'd sent a teacher to the hospital. The whole school knew. Apparently.

That left him isolated, meaning most of his classmates didn't really bother talking to him. Since this new world made it hard for him to be on the same page with anyone, being left alone wasn't a bad thing. Still...

That was just avoiding some minor trouble while the bigger issue loomed overhead. Just going to school wasn't enough to figure out what had happened to him, and it hadn't even provided any leads.

Clearly, this was too much to handle alone, so the moment fourth period ended, he headed for the science lab.

If he was still friends with Tomoe and Yuuma, he could safely assume he still knew Rio.

That assumption proved correct.

He took a seat across the lab table from her, took out the lunch his mother had given him, and began filling her in on the whole mess.

The little girl who looked like Mai.

The mystery scar.

The world he'd lived in, like here, but a bit different.

How they'd gone to see their mother for the first time in years.

And how the next day, nobody had seen him.

And finally, how he'd met mini Mai again—and the next thing he knew, he woke up in a different world.

He told her everything.

And asked for her help in sorting this all out.

He needed Rio's expert opinion. That was his only route to an escape.

She finished off her instant *harusame* and took a sip of coffee.

"Talk to a shrink," she said.

"I'm not sick."

“The only reasonable conclusion is that you’ve finally lost it.”

“I swear it’s true.”

He put a hand on his heart and then finished off the last chicken nugget. The soy sauce seasoning really hit the spot.

“Even if it was all true...then you’re right about one thing.”

“Right how?”

“You’ve been living in a world stemming from one possibility, and you’ve shifted over to a different one.”

She took out a Magic Marker and wrote *A* and *B* on a pair of beakers, then set them down on the table. There was a glass stirrer in beaker *A*, but she moved it over to *B*. Each beaker was a world, and Sakuta was the stirrer.

“Look, I know I came to you, but are *you* crazy?”

Her explanation sure sounded bonkers.

“This is merely speculation based entirely on the hypothetical that your babblings are true, leaving me in the clear.”

And that sure sounded like *he* wasn’t.

“And there’s a quantum explanation for all possible worlds existing close at hand, including the past and the future.”

“But I thought you generally can’t perceive that.”

This was something Rio had explained in the other world.

“They exist side by side, but imperceptibly. Even if we could see them, our minds would naturally reject that. That’s how it normally works.”

Rio gave him a pointed look on the word *normally*.

Sakuta didn’t believe himself special or messed up. But meeting Shouko had taught him a thing or two. Given him personal experience.

There were worlds where he died and worlds where Mai was in an accident. He *knew* these potentials existed.

So perhaps this was also one of the futures Shouko had seen. It existed

because she'd seen it, and he was merely visiting. That made sense to him. No way could he create a whole parallel world just for his own benefit.

"But are there really loads of these potential worlds, all existing at the same time?"

It would still make *more* sense if he was just dreaming this. Sakuta retained that much common sense.

"To be more accurate, since you're perceiving that to be true, there are for you. Since I am not, then they don't exist for me."

That was clear and consistent. Everything came down to that quantum stuff.

"Okay. So how would I get back?"

He grabbed the stirrer and put it back in beaker A.

"That's up to you, Azusagawa."

"....."

"You knew that already."

"Yeah..."

He wasn't completely dense. From what she'd said, if this *was* his Adolescence Syndrome, then the cause was pretty obvious.

His mom.

"Futaba, what do you think about your mother?"

".....?"

It was apparent from her reaction she had *not* been expecting that question and was genuinely surprised. Behind her glasses, he could see her eyes searching his face for an explanation.

The specifics of it were different from his, but Rio's relationship with her parents was also not exactly normal. Her father worked at a university hospital, and he lived and breathed workplace politics. Her mother was a boutique owner who spent the bulk of the year overseas doing acquisitions.

Rio was their only child, and she was left alone in a house far too big for her.

She said it had been years since all three of them ate together.

Last summer, the isolation had gotten to her, and she'd developed her own case of Adolescence Syndrome. That was when Sakuta learned about her family problems.

"I guess..." Rio said, eyes on the contents of her cup. Thinking it over, searching for the right words. "I feel like she's someone who refused to become a mother."

She took a sip of coffee, her expression never changing.

Not quite able to grasp the implications, Sakuta waited for her to explain.

"Being a mom means your life revolves around your kid."

She sounded ambivalent. That clearly didn't feel real to her, either.

"Sounds right," Sakuta said, feeling the same thing. He didn't have kids of his own yet, so he didn't really get it, but he felt like he at least had an idea. And that idea was what Rio was trying to say.

"And if kids are the center of your life, nobody calls you by your name."

"What does that mean?"

"Yours gets called 'Sakuta's mom,' or 'Kaede's mom.'"

"Oh..."

That did make sense.

"And...mine just couldn't accept being 'Rio's mom.' Bringing me up was never the center of her life. I guess a nicer way of saying it is that she never let her kid get in the way of doing what she wanted."

She was picking her words carefully, as if she was talking about a stranger. But objectively, what she said felt right. It explained what she meant when she said "refused to become a mother."

"And I guess that's one way to live."

"You've made your peace with it?"

"You and Kunimi helped me get there."

The emotion here wasn't *quite* resignation. The needle leaned toward acceptance, toward understanding. Not all of it, but she was clearly on the road to working through things.

"More him than me," Sakuta said.

Rio just glared at him. He pretended not to notice, avoiding her eyes.

"But it's really your choice to make, Azusagawa."

"What choice?"

"Are you gonna do what you always do? Go back to that world and work through things?"

"Is that what I always do?"

"Or are you gonna lie down like a whipped puppy and whine?"

"You are being so harsh today."

"From what you've told me, you basically ran away. To a world that was easier for you."

"I am kinda cut up about it, so...be nice."

"I'm being as nice as you deserve."

"How so?"

"You weren't *at all* nice when I was fretting about Kunimi."

That was a very Rio reason. And one he couldn't argue with.

"I guess you need friends who'll kick your ass when your ass needs kicking."

His new life motto.

The way she put it, he really didn't have a choice.

Then he heard a low hum. Rio ignored it, sipping her coffee.

Figuring she hadn't noticed, he said, "Futaba, your phone's ringing."

"That's not mine. It's yours."

"Huh?"

"In there."

She took the stirrer out of the beaker and pointed at his bag.

There *was* a phone sticking out of the pocket. Vibrating away.

“Seriously?”

Apparently, in this world he owned a *phone*. Since he’d saved Kaede from the bullies, he’d never had a reason to throw his cell into the ocean.

And the screen had Mai’s name on it.

“Hello, it’s your Sakuta.”

“Answer faster.”

Hardly worth the tongue lashing, but that was very Mai, so he already felt secure in the knowledge that he was talking to her. It lifted his whole body up, like all his cells came alive.

“You couldn’t wait one second to hear my voice?”

“Exactly.”

He’d been hoping to banter about that for a while, but Mai just up and owned it. There was a delighted grin hiding beneath that word, like she was the one teasing him. That, too, was the Mai he knew and loved. He’d been longing to see her again all day yesterday, and there she was, on the other end of the line.

“Sakuta, what are you up to now?”

“Eating lunch in the science lab.”

“Is that what you do there?”

“They provide coffee. I highly recommend.”

Rio was just pouring instant coffee into the extra hot water. The clear liquid visibly turned brown, then black.

“You said you have work today?”

“Yep.”

“What time?”

“I start at four.”

He glanced up at the clock above the board; it was one fifteen. It only took half an hour to get from school to the restaurant, so he didn't need to rush.

"Come over till then?"

"Over where?"

"My place."

"If you promise we can flirt."

"I'll be helping you study for next year."

"I *might* consider it *if* you wear the bunny-girl outfit."

"I threw that thing out."

"Aww. That's a shame."

What a twist. Apparently, in this world it hadn't wound up in his closet. Since he hadn't lived across the street, the opportunity had never come his way. Such a tragedy.

"So are you coming or not?"

"Mm, I've got stuff to hash out with Futaba, so better not."

"Oh?" She sounded surprised.

Across the table, Rio looked just as shocked. Her eyes had opened a tad, and she was giving him the look you would an unusual animal. He could almost hear her thinking, *Turning down Mai? What a rascal!*

"Sorry, Mai."

"It's not worth apologizing for."

"Then thanks."

"I haven't done anything to warrant that."

"But I love you."

"I know that."

"More than anyone."

"I'm hanging up now."

He could just see her shaking her head, blushing slightly. And she really did hang up.

Sakuta put the phone back in his backpack.

“You’re a liar in every world, Azusagawa,” Rio said.

He drank the coffee she’d made for him. It was instant, but it tasted like coffee and smelled like coffee. You got used to the beaker thing, too.

“I *do* love Mai.”

He knew that wasn’t what she meant, but he pretended he didn’t.

“That right there,” she said. “You *could* just go enjoy a date with her.”

“That would shake my resolve.”

“To do what?”

Rio knew the answer already. She was only asking to make it easier for him to put it in words.

“If I see Mai here, I’ll start thinking maybe it’s okay if I just find happiness in this world.”

He’d get used to running and never make it back to his world. He’d drown here, in a world without problems.

That wasn’t the worst fate, but it also wasn’t the Sakuta he wanted to be.

Talking to Mai like that had made him acutely conscious of her. He could feel himself wanting to rush home and see her again.

So he had to go home. To his real home.

To the Mai he’d promised to be with.

“But how are you planning to get there?” Rio asked. The obvious question.

“Any ideas?” he asked. He might have his emotions in line, but he was still missing key information.

“Maybe you can try to do the opposite of what got you here and go looking for the kid who looks like Sakurajima? She brought you here when you were lost, right?”

“I suppose.”

“Any clue where to look?”

“Maybe.”

Not a strong lead, but...he felt like if he went there, he'd see her. He'd met that girl three times. The first was a dream, but the other two were on Shichirigahama Beach. So was the dream, really.

He couldn't say anything for sure, but he felt like he'd see her if he wanted to. If this Adolescence Syndrome was his...then she'd be there.

He put his empty lunch box away.

And finished his coffee.

“Thanks,” he said before rising from the stool.

“Azusagawa.”

Rio stopped him as he turned to go. She was looking up at him, worried—but he wasn't sure why.

“What?” he asked.

“The logic of your potential world-hopping Adolescence Syndrome makes a certain kind of sense to me. If you can perceive an alternate potential world once, then you should be able to repeat that process. We can assume the scar on your belly is a product of your emotional state. The previous one was.”

Her words were clear, but her expression said otherwise. There was undoubtedly something still bothering her.

“So what's the problem?”

“In light of all that—the girl who looks like Sakurajima doesn't fit into the logic anywhere.”

Sakuta had instinctively felt the same thing. One weird thing after another had happened to him, so it was natural to assume they were connected, but it was entirely possible each thing was happening independently. And since it was happening to *him*, he was acutely aware of that.

Rio's words felt right.

The kid didn't fit.

"Let's just assume my love for Mai cannot be contained."

That wasn't exactly logical. It wouldn't convince Rio. But he figured it was better than silence. His words might not make sense, but his motives did, and it earned him a smile.

"Tomorrow I'll be my usual self again," he said.

"Don't make that promise and then come back for help right after."

"Well, if I do, you'll just have to laugh in my face."

He grabbed his book bag, said good-bye like they'd definitely meet again, and left the science lab.

He probably would see Rio tomorrow. This world's Sakuta, and this world's Rio. And if he met her himself, it would be the Rio from his original world. That's how things should be. That's how things had to be.

3

The hall to the entrance was deserted. Classes had ended in the morning, and very few students were left in the building.

He could hear athletes yelling on the field and the band tooting away—the standard after-school sounds.

So Sakuta didn't expect to meet anyone.

Until he found a girl standing by the shoe lockers.

"....."

Ikumi Akagi had her slippers in hand and shot him a guarded look.

"....."

He stared back, saying nothing.

Should he say something? He sure didn't know what.

After a moment's hesitation, he got his shoes out and changed into them. Then he put the slippers away.

“I took the log to the staff room,” Ikumi said, not looking at him.

“Mm?”

“You left it on the podium.”

“Isn’t that where it goes?”

“The teacher said to bring it down, way back in the spring.”

“Oh. My bad. Thanks.”

“Sure...”

Her eyes flicked his way once, and then she turned and left. Sakuta went with her. He’d already changed, so it felt weird to linger.

Ikumi made a beeline for the gate, and Sakuta quietly matched her pace.

“You seem fine with it, Akagi.”

He definitely wasn’t comfortable just calling her Akagi. He’d barely used her name back in junior high and would probably leave this world behind without it feeling right on his tongue. But that would serve this world well.

“Fine with what?”

“Talking to me.”

The rest of the class had clearly been avoiding him.

“I just know the stories aren’t true.”

She kept her head forward, one eye on the ground at her feet. Like she was consciously trying not to be conscious of him. He didn’t think he was imagining that. She probably wasn’t used to walking with boys. Maybe being less conscious of him than self-conscious.

“Why’d you come to Minegahara?”

There were plenty of public schools this good closer to their old school. Yokohama had a *lot* of schools, and there was no shortage to choose from.

He didn’t see any reason to pick a school over an hour away.

Ikumi stopped in her tracks not far from the school gates. The bells were ringing, and the crossing rails were coming down.

“.....”

She wasn't answering. Had he asked something awkward? Or was it more involved, like she was fine talking to him but didn't want him talking to her?

Sakuta and Ikumi were the only people stuck at the crossing, waiting for the train to pass.

“.....”

“.....”

Despite the clamor of the bells, the silence weighed on him.

“Did you know the reason the lights and this clanging noise aren't in sync is because by having them be separate systems, one will still function even if the other breaks?”

He'd asked Rio once when they were walking together, and she'd filled him in. Rio's vast base of knowledge extended to the inner workings of railroad crossings.

“Azusagawa...”

The train rolled past. Ikumi's lips didn't move again. Like hesitancy had silenced her. Once the train had passed, they stayed pursed.

Eventually, the bells stopped ringing, and the gates went up.

“...Never mind,” she said, looking away. “That's my train, so...”

And with that, she ran off ahead. Getting faster, headed for the station. She had great form. She didn't give him time to stop her, but he felt that was probably for the best. She might not have put it in words, but he'd caught a good look at the emotion in her gaze...and heard that louder than anything she could have said.

“So that's what Kunimi meant this morning.”

This world was *clearly* stacked in his favor. He'd saved his sister from bullying, kept his family together, and was still going to Minegahara despite the hour-plus commute. He and Mai were still together...and now there was Ikumi.

Having all that lined up together sure did make it seem like a fantasy world

tailored for him specifically. Quite honestly, he was unconvinced he had this in him.

It made it seem like the real Sakuta was a disaster.

All alone now, he started walking, crossing the tracks himself.

He took his phone out of his backpack pocket and looked up a number in the contacts list.

Instead of turning toward the station, he kept going straight, headed for the beach below.

As he went down the gentle slope, he dialed his home number. The home he'd left that morning, where the four of them lived together happily.

He could hear it ringing. Once, twice, three times, nobody picking up.

His mother should be there, and Kaede—she was already on spring vacation. But five rings in, there was still no answer. Maybe they'd gone out shopping.

But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the ring cut off.

"What is it, Sakuta?"

His mom's voice, answering with a question. Not a "Hello" or anything—the display must have told her it was him.

This was why he'd called, but having her answer still made him tense up.

"It's not, like, a big deal, but...", he managed.

"Mm."

"Did I mention I'll be back late tonight? I've got a shift."

This wasn't what he'd primed himself to say. But hearing his mother's voice had led him to talk about normal stuff. She was acting normal, so he could, too.

"You said that last night."

"I did?"

"That's why I made you a lunch."

He had no memories of this, but it seemed like she just assumed he forgot and laughed. Nothing mean about it. Just one of those things, and funny for all

involved.

“I guess you’re right,” Sakuta said, laughing himself. It was only partially for show.

“Are you *still* half-asleep?” she asked, referencing his morning behavior.

“Feels like.”

“Is that all?”

He hadn’t really had a real reason for this call. He’d just felt like he should say something to her. Before he left this world. Before he went back to his own. Sakuta needed a good look at the mother he’d fled.

“I ate every bite of the lunch.”

So he picked a topic close at hand. Something he could talk about whenever but...likely never did.

He reached the bottom of the hill and got stuck at Route 134. Caught at a red light just before the beach.

“The rice was a bit mushy today, wasn’t it?”

“I feel like it was.”

Their family preferred it al dente.

“I must have put in too much water.”

“But since I was eating it cold, it might have worked well that way.”

“Yeah?”

“And the chicken was to die for.”

He remembered that flavor. When he made the dish himself, he always tried to get it to taste just like how his mom made it, but it never really worked out. There were similarities, but the differences outweighed them. He didn’t think he was doing it all that different...but something wasn’t right.

“Where’s this coming from?”

“I know you get up early to cook all the time. So thanks.”

His eyes were on the blue water beyond the red light. Locked on it.

“Seriously, what’s gotten into you?”

She seemed perplexed, but not in a bad way. It was a warm reaction. Maybe a tad uncomfortable with this kind of praise. It seemed a bit late to see this side of her. But like him, she was only human. A fact so obvious he should have worked it out long ago.

“Besides, I should be saying the same to you, Sakuta.”

“Mm?”

“Thank you.”

Sakuta didn’t know what that meant.

“For...?”

“For being a great brother.”

“A what now?”

He was acting like he didn’t get it, but it wasn’t hard to guess.

“You took care of Kaede.”

“.....Mm,” he grunted. Exactly what he thought, and thus he couldn’t really respond. *He* hadn’t done anything of the kind. He hadn’t occupied any broadcast booths.

That feat belonged to this world’s Sakuta.

He himself hadn’t earned this praise yet.

“Ten thirty?”

Conversations with family could make leaps like this.

“Mm?”

“You’ll be home?”

“About then, yeah.”

His shift ran till nine. He’d have to change, take a few trains—half past ten sounded right.

“What should I have ready for you?”

“There any croquettes left?”

“Enough for tomorrow, too.”

She sounded proud.

“You made too many.”

The croquettes at breakfast had been intended for dinner the night before.

“We had too many potatoes, so we just used them up.”

That’s the sort of person she was. It was all coming back to him. Anytime she made curry or croquettes, her idea of balance went right out the window. They always wound up with enough for days.

If she did it back-to-back, they’d end up with croquettes Monday to Wednesday, and curry Thursday to Saturday. Like a dream come true. A life you wished was a dream.

“Text me when you hit the station, and I’ll give them a quick fry.”

“Got it.”

“Have fun at work.”

The conversation was headed for its natural conclusion.

“Uh, Mom...” So Sakuta stopped that.

“Yes?”

He had something to say. Something he had to say. But...

“Never mind,” he said, laughing awkwardly.

“Oh? Well, take care, then.”

“I will.”

She hung up.

His phone hand went limp, dangling. The light was still red. Beyond it lay the cloudless blue sky.

He’d wanted to say something. Had to say it. But it wasn’t *this* mom he had to say it to.

This was something he had to tell *his* mom, back in the world he came from.

The light finally turned green.

He put the phone in his backpack and looked right ahead, staring at the water before him.

When he hit the beach, his shoes sank into the sand. Walking here made him look like he was sneaking around. He made it about fifteen yards from the surf.

Where the sand just started to get damp.

From here, all he could see was the horizon, where the sky met the sea.

The sound of the waves wrapped around him.

The scent of salt filled the air.

That's all there was.

He couldn't hear the traffic on the road behind him or the laughter of the college girls horsing around nearby. The sound of the waves and the wind protected him.

And as his senses closed down, he began to feel like he was alone in the world.

His body felt less and less real.

He let himself bask in that sensation.

"Mister, are you lost *again*?"

That kid's voice.

She was standing right next to him. With the same red knapsack. So tiny it looked like she could barely keep her balance with it.

The girl who looked like Mai in her child-actress years.

"I'm not lost anymore."

"Why not?"

A very kid-like question. She was a kid, so it made sense.

"I know where home is," he said, totally honest.

“You’re going there?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

This again.

“You could stay here forever,” she added, before he could answer.

“I could. This place is pretty nice.”

Kaede’s bullying had ended before it scarred her, and their mother was still happy. They all lived together. This world’s Sakuta was still dating Mai and had a rich, fulfilling life.

Nothing wrong with that. It was everything he’d ever wanted.

“But it’s a bit *too* nice.”

“Is nice bad?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“.....?”

Her head tilted. She looked very confused.

“Everyone sorted themselves out.”

“Everyone?”

“Mai, Koga, Futaba, Toyohama, both Kaedes, Makinohara and Shouko...they all got through it themselves.”

Maybe not alone. Maybe they had help. But in the end, they moved on, of their own free will. Even though the path wasn’t easy. Even though it was paved with thorns. They got over their Adolescence Syndrome without running away. By peering into the depths of their own hearts.

That’s why...

“I’ve gotta handle Mom myself.”

Not have someone else solve it for him. Not run to a different potential world. With his own two hands.

“So I could use your help again,” he said, holding out his hand.

The girl stared at it for a moment. Like she was making up her mind. And as he looked her over, an idea floated into his mind.

Rio had said this girl didn’t fit into the rest of it, but maybe she was the weakness inside Sakuta. The child inside him.

Something he’d unconsciously created to help him deal with his mommy issues. She looked like Mai because that would make him honest.

He had no basis for this wild claim.

Rio might have laughed it off.

But to him, it made a certain kind of sense.

“You really do want to go home.”

“Yeah. Literally what I said.”

“But if you go back there, everyone’s forgotten you.”

She peered up at him fixedly. Beautiful eyes, like crystallized purity. They seemed to look right through him.

“But I want to go back.”

“You’re sure?” she asked, as if looking for any sign of doubt.

“I’m sure.”

“You promise?”

“Pinkie promise.”

He didn’t flee or draw back from that purity. He met her gaze and held it, seeing himself reflected in her eyes.

“Okay. Then I’ll help.”

She took his hand and held it tight.

“Just help?”

“You got *here* on your own. I just told you that you could.”

She looked proud of herself, but he didn’t really know what she meant.

But he didn't need to.

This was the last time, anyway. And since it was, maybe they should talk about something else. Back in his world, with his Adolescence Syndrome resolved, he'd probably never see this girl again. And since they'd met, he'd been meaning to tell her something.

"I know it's a bit late."

"What?"

"But I'm not old enough to be considered a 'mister.'"

He said this so seriously, and she laughed out loud. An innocent, delighted laugh. Smile broad enough to show her teeth. Her voice rising to the sky above.

And that was all. His mind slipped away from him. In the blink of an eye, like a TV turning off.

Character
Profiles



High School Idol

**Nodoka
Toyohama**

Mai's sister from another mother. Member of Sweet Bullet. Flashy vibe, but goes to a very prestigious school.



Sakuta's Sister

**Kaede
Azusagawa**

Bullying left her stuck at home for a long time. Now fifteen, she's about to start high school.



Petite Devil Kohai

Tomoe Koga

Very modern first-year at Sakuta's school. Works at the same restaurant. A bit impulsive.

Cool, Quiet
Scientist

Rio Futaba

Same year as Sakuta, in the Science Club. One of Sakuta's few friends, and a trusted confidant. Helps him figure out Adolescence Syndrome cases.





Home

1

The noise of Sakuta's alarm penetrated the void where his mind had gone, forcing him to face the fact of his own existence.

As his mind came into focus, his eyes snapped open.

The first thing he saw was that same old white ceiling. That round light fixture. The six-mat space, the confines of which he knew by heart. His bed, his desk, and a set of shelves—not much else.

Sakuta's room. Where he'd lived for two years, since their move to Fujisawa. A space all his own, where he could relax. And that sure came as a relief.

"I'm home, then," he said aloud—to make it real.

Then he made the alarm stop ringing.

The screen showed Wednesday, March 18.

He'd spent a whole day in a different potential world and only made it back this morning.

Yawning, he heaved himself out of bed. But something in the air felt...odd.

It was definitely his room. The air on his skin, the vibe—everything told him he was back in *his* world. He knew that instinctively.

But there was something in the room that didn't belong. Like a smile he couldn't recognize. And he located the source atop his desk.

A notebook. Left open.

He looked closer and found a note scrawled across both pages.

———*Other Sakuta, fix your shit.*

He knew that handwriting. It looked like his. A lot like his. It almost certainly was his. But he hadn't personally written the note.

So who had?

There was no doubt in his mind. The line itself spelled it out.

“A note from another Sakuta...”

Probably the one from the potential world he’d visited the day before. While he’d been in that world, that world’s Sakuta must have been here.

The writing in the notebook proved it.

There was more.

———*When you get back, put this letter in Mai’s mailbox.*

Sakuta wasn’t sure what that meant.

“What letter?”

There was a sheet of paper next to the notebook, clearly torn out of it. It was folded in half, then folded again, with *To Mai* written on the top. Also in his handwriting.

He opened it up, wondering what was inside.

———*I promise I’ll make you happy, Mai.*

That was it.

“Yeah, buddy, I got that much.”

It seemed like the other Sakuta had a pretty clear handle on his current state of affairs.

The letter was signed *From your Sakuta.*

That was definitely something he’d do.

“Objectively pretty obnoxious.”

And a bit creepy.

Maybe he should do that more selectively.

He balled the letter up and tossed it in the trash can next to his desk. It hit the bottom with a satisfying thunk.

Then he tore a fresh sheet of paper out of the notebook and wrote the exact same note himself. As neat as he could manage. Trying for better handwriting than the other Sakuta. Then he folded it up neatly.

The notebook was still lying open, so he closed it—and found a second note lying under it. In much smaller letters, it said...

———*What do you think of Touko Kirishima?*

“What the...?”

Why was this a question?

“No strong opinions either way.”

That was his gut reaction. He was aware that her work was popular right now, but he didn’t really care.

Why had the other Sakuta left him this question? It probably had something to do with the other Sakuta’s world, but what, he had no idea. And he didn’t really have time to sit pondering the unknowable.

He’d made it safely back to his world.

But had yet to solve the problems facing him here.

He rolled his shirt up and checked, but the white scar on his side was still there.

Proof this wasn’t over.

Sakuta moved to the living room to investigate further. He punched every number he knew into the phone—Mai, Rio, Yuuma, even Nodoka—but never even got a dial tone.

Kaede wasn’t here. Nasuno was sleeping on the *kotatsu*. He figured Kaede was with their mom and hadn’t come home. If she’d forgotten Sakuta existed, then odds were she didn’t even know she had a home in Fujisawa.

Sakuta wasn’t getting his hopes up.

But he needed to know for sure. He grabbed the folded letter and left the apartment.

Took the elevator downstairs and went outside.

It was the start of the morning commute, and there were several suits and students headed toward the station.

Sakuta waltzed out into the middle of the street and took his shirt off, just to be totally obvious.

A middle-aged businessman strolled right past.

A college girl never even glanced his way.

He stood there for a solid five minutes, trying a good thirty passersby, but nobody made eye contact, and nobody called the police to report a streaker. And no cop cars rolled up on him.

He didn't have much choice left. He grimaced and committed to the strategy the other Sakuta had devised.

He put his shirt back on and stepped through the doors of Mai's place. He opened her mailbox and put the letter in.

He wasn't worried.

Somehow, even in this predicament, he was having fun.

It was almost like he'd just scored himself a date.

Mai had said she'd be back from Yamanashi tomorrow—Thursday, March 19.

He couldn't exactly wait outside the post boxes until then, so he went back home, fed Nasuno, and ate breakfast.

Once that was done, he washed his face, brushed his teeth, took a leak, and put his uniform on.

"Here goes nothing," he said, to no one at all, and left the house.

He did consider heading to Yamanashi to see Mai. He still *wanted* to. But she hadn't specified the exact location, and Yamanashi was a whole-ass prefecture. Tracking her down didn't feel like a realistic goal. He'd just have to stay here and look forward to tomorrow.

He still was a bit anxious and unsettled. How could he not be?

He was hanging on to the end of a thread, and no one could even tell he was there. Rio had described it as a statistical state in which he both did and didn't exist. Sakuta had no clue what the hell that actually meant, but he was sure it was right. That his very existence was trembling like a leaf in the wind.

But that's exactly *why* he chose to go to school.

To do the normal thing.

Sakuta hoped doing what he always did would help keep him rooted to this world. His routine should help him personally feel that he was actually here.

So he walked at his usual pace. Ten minutes to Fujisawa Station. The typical morning bustle. Suits and students on their way to the office or school, filing through the JR gates or leaving them to transfer to the Odakyu Enoshima Line.

Like he did every day, he slipped through the crowds, out the south side, and across the fifty-yard connective bridge. He tapped his train pass on the Enoden Fujisawa Station gate and stepped onto the platform.

He made it in time for his usual train.

As it pulled out, he took the vocab book out of his bag. He memorized one word at a time, then used the red plastic to cover the answers and make sure he remembered them all.

That got him all the way to Shichirigahama.

He joined the throng of Minegahara students heading to the school itself. At the shoe lockers, he changed into his slippers. He saw Tomoe, and Yuuma walked right in front of him, but neither one noticed Sakuta. Nobody could tell he was there. It was that simple.

He'd known it would be like this, but it still hurt to have friends sail right past him. But the warning bell rang, so he hustled to class.

No use hanging his head now.

He had something to pin his faith on.

He could do this.

It might not be scientific evidence—but he had someone he could rely on. Someone who mattered.

He had Mai.

He was sure she would find him. That was something he could believe in.

Sakuta wouldn't be stuck in this invisible-man life for long. He'd be back to

normal before he knew it.

It was best he stuck to his routine so he didn't have to scramble to catch up.

Third-term finals were over, so all they were doing was giving back answer sheets and going over the questions. Sakuta listened intently anyway, figuring it would benefit him later.

But since this world couldn't perceive him, he didn't get his answers back. He still took notes on anything he was sure he'd missed.

If their teacher said, "This is often on college entrance exams," he paid extra attention.

They only had classes in the morning, but he took all four periods seriously.

Once the end-of-day homeroom wrapped up, students with clubs or practice stuck around and ate their lunches. Everyone else headed home. Sakuta usually joined them, but since there was nothing to do back home but study, he headed to the library, eating the red-bean bun he'd brought with him on the way.

If he was just studying, he might as well do it at school.

"Heyo," he said, opening the door. There was no one in the library. No long ago, there'd been quite a lot of third-years prepping for exam season. But they'd all graduated now.

He took a seat by a window with an ocean view and opened a math study guide. They'd been going over derivatives in class, and he felt like he should practice that some more. He didn't know what these were used for, but since they *would* be on the test, he had to wrap his head around them.

He wanted to enjoy college life with Mai. Wanted to see her smile. And it *might* improve his own future.

Barring a single bathroom run, he stuck to his desk, very focused. Several students came by and asked the librarian questions, but he didn't let them distract him.

Finally, a voice said, "Closing up," and pulled him out of it. The librarian was a quiet type in her thirties, and she was doing a last scan of the room, checking between each shelf to make sure no students were still here.

She walked right past Sakuta without seeing him.

He quickly gathered up his things and slipped out the doors before she locked them. It would suck to get locked in.

Once he was in the hall, he realized it was already dark out. He looked west; the sun was already down. There was just a faint glow out beyond Enoshima, across the waters behind the mountains in Odawara, Yugawara, and Hakone. Just the last traces of the sunset, and even as he looked, those, too, faded to night.

The sports teams were no longer shouting. The lights were turning off.

The school was shutting down before his very eyes.

Sakuta had been going to Minegahara for two years but had never seen this side of it. A whim struck him, and he decided to stick around until it was all done.

This was likely his sole chance to see this.

If he'd been visible, the teachers would have told him to hurry home and kicked him out.

All the lights on the third floor were off, and the first two floors were close behind. Only the faculty office was still aglow.

At just past eight, that went out, too.

Not a single light stayed on anywhere in the school. But even so, it didn't get too dark to see his feet.

The emergency exit lights were on, and there was moonlight coming in through the windows.

Sakuta waited for the last teacher to leave and headed for the shoe lockers. He changed and left. The moonlight seemed extra bright.

He looked up but couldn't find the moon itself. The building was in the way.

Continuing to scan the skies, he wheeled around onto the athletic field.

Nothing blocked his view here.

The moon hung in the night sky above. Not quite full. He stood in the center

of the field, and it looked down at him.

This was a key location in his life.

He'd asked Mai out here.

Not even a year ago. Only ten months. But their time together had been enough that just standing here made him miss her.

Tomorrow was so far away.

He wished it could be tomorrow right now.

Heading home and going to sleep was probably the best way to make that happen.

He turned to go—and saw someone on the edge of the field. Behind the net.

Was a teacher still here?

That was his first thought.

But he soon knew better.

The figure took one step, and that was all he needed.

He knew how she walked.

She stepped out from the net, onto the field.

The moonlight caught her.

"Mai...", he said.

She was coming his way, her steps light. Like always.

Heading directly toward him.

Her eyes turned his way. Like she could see him.

Their eyes *met*.

He wasn't imagining it. She held his gaze, not looking away. He didn't dare move a muscle.

Why was Mai here?

She wasn't due back until tomorrow.

Why was she coming right toward him, no hesitation, like nothing was wrong?

Even though the world itself could no longer perceive him.

He had believed she would find him, yet he still wondered.

But that doubt did not last long.

Mai was coming his way. He could see her face now, and nothing else mattered.

He'd wanted to see her, and now she was here. She was coming to him. That fact vanquished all other concerns.

Mai walked right toward him like she always did. But ten yards out, her confident look began to waver. She couldn't hold back anymore. Her pace shifted, growing faster. Five yards out, it turned into a run, and she flung herself at Sakuta, her arms around his neck, holding him tight.

There was no distance left between them.

Her breath was in his ear, slightly ragged. Their chests pressed together. He could feel her heart beating fast, the *ba-bump, ba-bump* telling him how she felt.

He must have scared her. He figured he should say sorry. Explain how things had come to this.

It all stemmed from his hesitancy. His inability to work through his feelings about his mother. He felt like he should tell her this but...couldn't.

Before he did, she whispered in his ear. "Sakuta."

"Yes?" he asked.

Her arms pulled him even closer. "One day, we'll have to make a home together," she whispered.

Her voice was calm, quiet, and warm.

He could feel Mai on his eardrum, and that feeling spread out, seeping into every inch of him. Like her essence was wrapping itself around the fears inside his heart.

That one line robbed him of speech. All the words he'd been getting ready to

say just crumbled away, leaving not a trace behind. Like they had never existed in the first place.

She'd said exactly what he needed to hear.

What he'd always wanted to hear.

What he'd long been searching for.

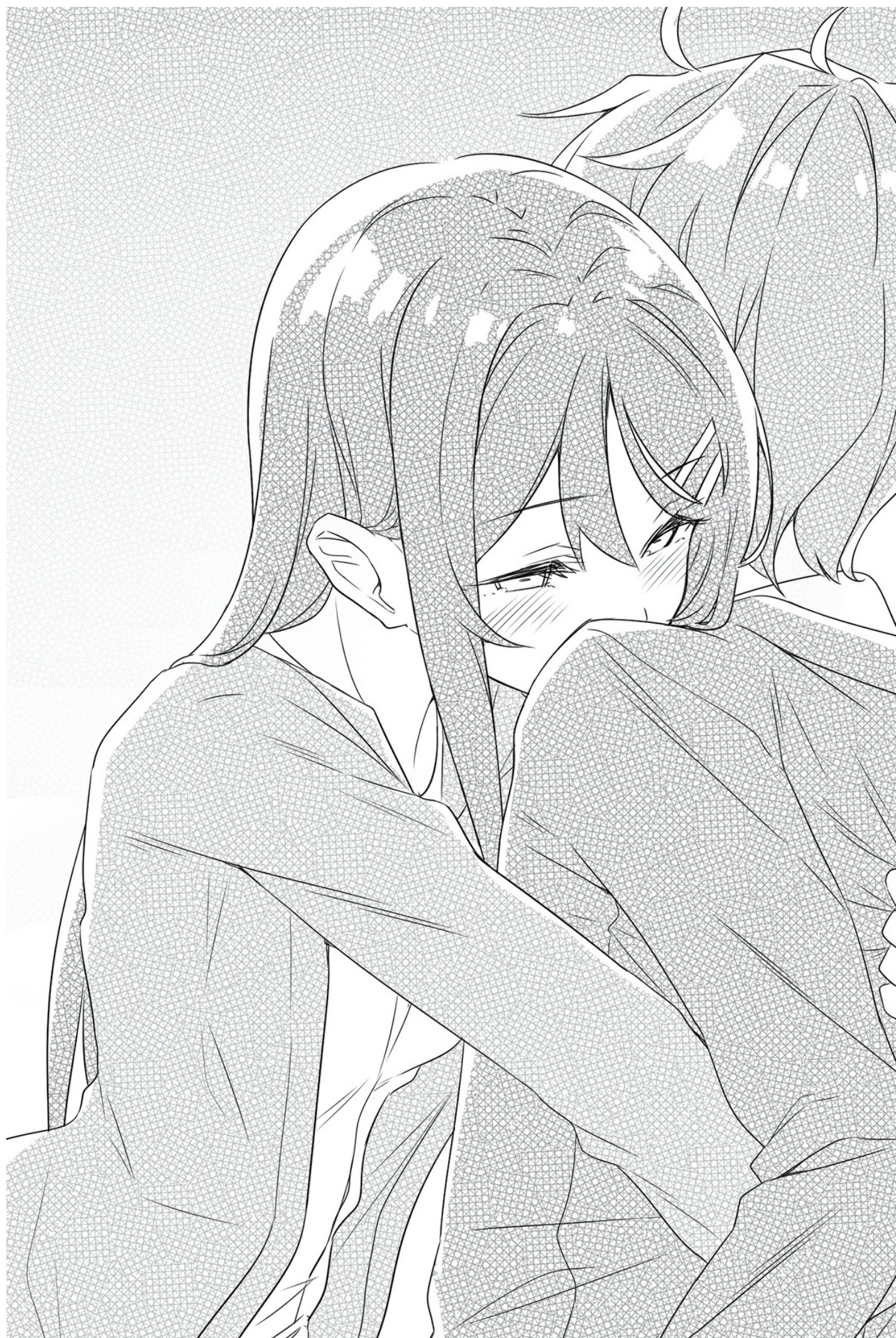
But Sakuta hadn't known he couldn't find it, didn't even know what he was looking for.

You can't search for what you don't know. And you definitely can't find it.

And yet Mai had found it and brought it to him.

A gift.

He had nothing to offer in return, but the heat of the moment warmed him up, and he hugged her back. His arms expressed his joy, his gratitude, everything he couldn't find the words to say.



2

At nine PM, Shichirigahama Station was very quiet. No one else here. At this hour, the station didn't even have an attendant.

With the place to themselves, they sat on a bench, side by side.

The station lights hummed faintly. Neither the sound of the surf nor the sound of traffic on Route 134 reached them here.

Only the smell of the sea made it this far.

"It worked," Mai said softly.

"Mm?"

He looked her way, a question in his gaze.

"The charm," she said with an impish grin.

"Oh."

That cleared up one of his questions.

What had brought Mai back a day early?

The good luck charm.

The marriage application with their names on it.

He'd had her hang on to it.

And that had made her remember him.

That's why she'd come back a day early. To be here for him.

She'd probably found the letter and come to school not long after.

It wasn't coincidence or a miracle. Sakuta's salvation came from what they'd built together.

And that alone filled him with joy.

With his mind filled with memories of their time together, he never noticed how long the train was taking. Time spent with Mai was never boring.

It was a good ten minutes before a train came in from Kamakura.

The Enoden rolled in out of the night. With no lights around save the lampposts, the glow of the windows was that much brighter. The train they always rode looked so different.

Few passengers were aboard.

But there were enough to tell if anyone besides Mai could see him. The moment they got on, he could feel it. Nobody here could.

He glanced her way as a warning, then yelled real loud. No one turned to look. People were busy with their phones or flirting with their partners. Nothing else got through.

As he looked around, he felt Mai take his hand. She pulled him over to an empty green seat. And she didn't let go until they reached Fujisawa Station.

At the end of the line, they got off, but they still couldn't find anyone who could see Sakuta.

It was almost ten.

The station area was filled with office workers headed home. The town was not yet ready to sleep.

Mai and Sakuta walked through the crowd, hands held. Usually, they had to be conscious of the public eye. Mai was a bit *too* famous and did not want to create a media frenzy.

The chance to break that rule was liberating and nerve-racking, but more fun than anything else. They went out the north side of the station, running through the crowds hand-in-hand.

That giddy rush gradually faded on the walk home. By the time they crossed the Sakai River, neither was smiling.

If nobody else could see Sakuta, the core problem remained unresolved.

They couldn't celebrate yet.

They reached their respective buildings without either saying much. Sakuta's building lay on one side, and Mai's on the other. Across the street.

Before he could say anything, she went with him. Or rather, she pulled his hand toward his building.

Inside, she said, “I’ll whip something up,” and headed to the kitchen. Soon they had rice, miso soup, and rolled eggs. He hadn’t gone shopping yet, so the fridge was empty.

“It’s like breakfast on a Showa-era TV show,” Mai said, laughing at her own metaphor. Sakuta managed a chuckle himself.

Once their bellies were full, Mai said, “I filled the bath. Get in. You’re exhausted, and you need to unwind. Take your time.”

“I’d stay in forever if you’d join me.”

“That would *not* be relaxing.”

This was not a surprise, and she pushed him into the changing room.

He *was* pretty worn out, so he didn’t really argue. Physically and mentally, every part of him felt drained. He did what Mai suggested and soaked for a good long time.

With his clothes off, he could see the white mark on his belly. He inspected it in the mirror. It didn’t seem to be fading at all.

No one but Mai could see him.

This wasn’t over. The scar said as much.

He hadn’t faced his mother yet.

“...What do I even *want*?”

He lay back in the tub, staring at the ceiling. Putting his thoughts in words. Straightening out the interior of his heart so that he knew where everything was.

That alone might justify the long bath.

He got out before his head started swimming, and for once, Mai actually took his place. Even when she spent the night, she usually went back to her place to bathe. The only time she’d ever used his bath was when she and Nodoka had switched bodies. She’d never done it looking like herself. He was still marveling

at that when she pointed at the hall.

“Get it? Then get out.”

“I was hoping to stick around.”

She let that roll right off her, pushing him out of the washroom. In his underwear. The door closed behind him, and he heard it lock.

“Mai, do you have a change of clothes?”

“I ran home earlier and brought your favorite sleepwear back with me.”

He soon found her tote bag, stuffed full.

“Towel?”

“Can I borrow one?”

“Top shelf are all brand-new.”

“Thanks.”

“.....”

“Go get dressed!”

She’d caught on that he was listening through the door.

Per her orders, he went back to his room and put on his home clothes. He definitely didn’t want to catch a cold and cause her more problems.

Out of things to do, Sakuta sat down on the bed. He leaned his shoulder against the wall, leaving his feet dangling over the side.

He sat like that for a solid half hour.

Mai still wasn’t out of the bath.

The shower stopped running. For a while, it was replaced by the whir of a hair dryer.

The door to the changing room opened a good twenty minutes later.

Mai stepped into his room, in fluffy sleepwear, both top and bottom three-quarters length.

“Nasuno’s conked out in the *kotatsu*,” she said. She must have poked her

head into the living room.

Mai breathed in, then out, then got up on his bed. She put a pillow on her lap as she sat next to Sakuta. Their shoulders were almost touching. Her hand soon found his.

“I feel like if I let go, you’ll go away again.”

This sounded like an excuse.

But that was all she said. From that point on, she just sat in silence, holding his hand. She was simply being there with him.

No pressure. And before long, the words started pouring out.

“It was wrong to push my mother out of my mind.”

The lights weren’t even on. His voice almost echoed. There were dim lights in the hall and the living room, and the door was open, so some light spilled around the frame. But that was all.

Mai said nothing. Her eyes were on him as she listened.

“Kaede and I moved to Fujisawa, and we had to live without our parents’ help.”

Their father *had* provided some economic assistance.

“I had to wake myself up, make my own food, do my own laundry, clean our rooms and the bath and the toilet, and take out the trash. I *had* to do it all, so I learned how.”

If he’d been alone, he’d probably have slacked off on a lot of it. But he had Kaede to look after, which kept him motivated. Made it all seem doable.

“I had to learn to handle things without a mom.”

That wasn’t what he’d wanted. He hadn’t had a choice. He hadn’t wanted to forget her and move on. That was just how it turned out.

“I didn’t know when she’d get better, or even *if* she would.”

“Mm.”

“I guess I didn’t let myself hope.”

“...Oh.”

“And it all became routine. Life stuff that had seemed so hard...became *comfortable*.”

“Mm...”

“And after all that, now...”

He’d been shoveling out words, searching for his feelings, and that brought him here.

“Why *now*?”

He found the source of the resentment.

His mother getting better should have been a good thing.

Sakuta’s rational mind was yelling at him for this.

But his mother’s recovery was also destroying the life he’d spent two years building.

A life that had been all kinds of messed up and weird when it started but was now his regular routine. And his heart was fighting any change that threatened his new way of life.

Maybe they could all live together again, like a normal happy family—and that thought shook him.

Part of him was clutching his head. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he just accept that this was good news?

Those feelings stuck in his throat, and he couldn’t find the right words.

“Sakuta, that’s how you should be.”

Mai’s gentle voice filled the silence.

Her arms wrapped around him.

“How so?”

Her meaning eluded him.

His feelings were wrong. He should never have forgotten his mother, moved on with his life. He wanted to be *nice*, and that wasn’t a nice thing to do.

“You no longer need your parents to clean, cook, and do laundry for you.”

“.....”

“You wake yourself up, go to school, and work a job to earn your own money.”

“...What about it?”

That was his life. Had been for two years. He’d sacrificed his mother for it—
“You know what we call that, Sakuta?”

“.....”

He shook his head, totally lost.

“We call that growing up.”

Mai looked at him and flashed a smile. Like she was celebrating his step into maturity. A genuinely *nice* smile.

And her feelings, her words—they filled his soul. They sank deep, deep inside him and warmed his frozen core. Heat steadily radiated out until his emotions detonated.

Before he knew it, he was crying. The tears gushed out and rolled down his cheeks, refusing to be contained.

He sobbed like a little kid. When he coughed, Mai patted his back. She pulled him close against her chest.

He was safe there. Sakuta finally felt secure enough to cry it all out. Like how a child’s tears wash away everything bad.

3

In the morning, his alarm clock didn’t ring. But when the time Sakuta usually woke arrived, his body sensed morning coming and woke up anyway.

He peeled his eyes open, a bit reluctant.

“.....”

He blinked twice, saying nothing.

His head was turned to the side. And Mai's face was right in front of him. Lying there with him, looking back at him. On the same bed, beneath the same comforter.

She was somewhere between four and eight inches away. He could almost feel her breath, and he *might* have been able to count her lashes.

Seeing the expression of surprise on his face, Mai said, "Look who's up."

"Uh, is it morning?" He lifted the covers to check the state of their attire.

"What *are* you doing?" she asked, baffled. Mai genuinely didn't understand his motivation.

"Making sure you left me decent."

He remembered sitting in bed, talking to her. How she'd held his hand as his emotions poured out. Accepting all of it with a smile, a nod, and a kind look in her eye.

He must have worn himself out and drifted off.

Sakuta didn't remember falling asleep.

So he definitely wanted to make sure he hadn't also forgotten climbing the stairs to adulthood.

"I would never."

"Yeah?"

"I didn't even kiss you!"

That was pretty adorable. And the way she couldn't quite look him in the eye when she said it? Even more so.

He'd tried to restrain himself. But after a line like that, his reason could no longer hold him back. Resistance was futile.

"Maiiiii!"

His hands reached out and closed around her waist.

"O-oh, no, Sakuta! Let go!"

"You're too cute, Mai! I can't!"

“Kn-knock that off before I have to scold you!”

But even as she spoke, the hand pushing him away was weakening.

“Just this once,” she whispered.

And her arms slipped around his head, cradling him to her chest.

“This really does make me feel safe,” he said.

And she smelled good. But if he said so, she would definitely let go.

“Five more seconds.”

“I’d rather have five hours.”

“I could allow five minutes.”

“I should have said five days.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

They’d bantered like this several times before, but this time it felt different. They were each taking a bit longer to speak, making sure they’d heard the other right, leaving space between their lines.

And enjoying each other’s company.

Reveling in this intimate moment.

Even when the banter died away, they both had a smile on their lips. It wasn’t a *silence*.

Words weren’t needed for Sakuta to *feel* Mai’s presence, and he was sure she was wordlessly sensing him right back.

For a full minute, they savored the hush, then Mai spoke again.

“Plans for today, Sakuta?”

Speaking just a tad slower than usual.

“You first,” Sakuta said, matching that speed.

He wasn’t answering a question with a question from a lack of ideas. He’d woken up to find Mai there with him—and his plans for the day were already set.

But he wasn't yet ready to say them out loud.

"...I've got work," Mai said, her spirits visibly drooping. Clearly, she'd rather be with him. "I've gotta get back to Yamanashi."

He'd expected that. She'd likely pulled a lot of strings to come see him.

"Can you make it?"

"I'm still good on time."

"No, I mean...you didn't sleep, right?"

It wasn't any sign of fatigue on her face that made him ask. In his state, Mai was not about to let something like that slip in front of him.

He just assumed she hadn't slept because if it were the other way around, and she drifted off to sleep, he would definitely have stayed up all night watching over her.

"Ryouko's sending a car for me, so I can nap on the road."

"We'll have to thank Hanawa later."

Their relationship had caused quite a few headaches for Mai's manager. But she always came through. They owed Ryouko quite a bit.

"So what'll you do, Sakuta?"

The conversation brought her smoothly back to that. Her voice was gentle, like a warm embrace. Coaxing it out of him. Leaving him no choice.

"I'm gonna go see my mom."

"Can you handle it alone?"

"I don't know."

No point in faking it. He spoke the truth as he felt it.

"And because, I dunno, I kinda feel like it'll work out?"

He *was* wound up about it. But not so much that he was in trouble. Maybe getting to talk to his mother in that potential world had given him a modicum of confidence.

And what Mai said last night meant a lot.

She had eased his insecurities.

Praised him for getting by without his parents.

Shown him how that was a good thing.

He could stand on his own two feet now. He had to.

“So I’m just gonna go see my mom,” he said again. As if convincing himself.

“Okay.”

Mai didn’t wish him luck. She didn’t tell him to hang in there or promise he could do it.

“I’ll be waiting.”

She just *trusted* him.

Waited to hear the good news.

That was the hardest thing to do, but Mai could do it.

Do it for Sakuta.

“And once things settle down, make sure you introduce me.”

“Mm?”

“I’ll have to meet your mom eventually.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to tell her about the marriage.”

“Look, the thing yesterday was different.”

“Different how?”

“That was not a proposal.”

“Aww.”

“I can’t give you a morning kiss if we’re hugging like this.”

She replaced the stick with a very tempting carrot. Sakuta bit instantly, pulling away from her. He moved his face into position to get that morning smooch, but she pushed it away.

“Mmph!”

His nose smooshed, and he made a weird noise.

Mai pushed right over him, getting out of bed.

“What happened to the kiss, Mai?!” he wailed, sitting up.

She was straightening out her hair with her fingers.

“Brush your teeth first.”

And with that, she left the room. He heard her heading to the washroom. Probably to look herself over in the mirror. Wanting to look her best for him...

That thought put a smile on his lips.

Just having Mai with him made mornings so much more fun.

Just hearing her voice lifted his spirits.

Even if she was teasing him a bit, that just made him grin and love her all morning. He could tell.

Just being with Mai made him happy.

But that wasn't all.

Rio and Yuuma gave him strength.

Tomoe and Nodoka made him laugh.

Kaede kept him motivated.

And the more people get, the more they want.

Mai's warmth still lingered on his bed, but Sakuta got up anyway.

To stand on his own two feet.

4

Just past eight, Ryouko Hanawa swung by to pick Mai up. Sakuta saw her off at the door. Ryouko probably couldn't see him, so if he followed her all the way downstairs, it would make for some awkward explanations.

On his own, he cleaned up the breakfast dishes and did a load of laundry. Then he changed and left the house.

His trip took several trains from Fujisawa Station. An hour's ride in all.

For lack of anything better to do on the train, Sakuta spent it thinking about what to say to his mom. The same thoughts looping through his head.

Kaede getting bullied, how hard that had been on everyone. Then the dissociative disorder—and Sakuta had barely been able to handle his own mess.

But he'd still found a way to step up and take care of both Kaedes.

Trying to fend for himself, there'd been times when he'd held it against his parents...but now he didn't know what to think.

But Sakuta only had one mom. His mom. That fact hadn't changed.

And there were things he'd worked out because they lived apart. Like just how much he'd taken his parents for granted.

He kept thinking, trying to get his words as accurate and impactful as he could.

The hour went by before he knew it. He found himself standing outside the workers' housing, where his mother was.

He took the stairs one step at a time. Face-to-face with his own heart.

Outside the door, he rang the bell. The button didn't even respond to his push.

He took the key from his pocket and opened the door. He'd always planned on doing this, so there seemed to be little point in hesitating now.

He took off his shoes and stepped into the hall. When he looked into the dining room, he found it oddly quiet. There were no sounds of life.

No one in the living room. The tatami room was empty, too. The final bedroom also deserted.

"Mom? Kaede?" he called.

Just to be sure, he checked the bath and toilet, finding neither of them, nor his dad.

"Did they go out?"

His dad was probably at work, but he didn't know why his mom or Kaede would leave. His mom was only temporarily out of the hospital, and Kaede had just graduated junior high. She was on spring break.

Sakuta went back to the dining room and found a calendar on the fridge.

March 19 was circled with a red pen, and *Dr. appt* was written under that.

That was today.

His mother must have had a checkup. Kaede had probably gone with her.

There was a pamphlet for the hospital pinned to the fridge by a magnet. It was near Shin-Yokohama Station. A Tokaido Shinkansen station just past Tokyo and Shinagawa. His father had said they had a good psychiatric care facility.

From here, it was one station away.

Sakuta checked the map over, then put his shoes back on and headed out. He wasn't sure when they were due back and didn't feel like waiting.

One thought drove him forward.

He wanted to be the one who went to her.

He took the walk back to the station a bit faster than normal. There wasn't really a reason to hurry, but his feelings were out ahead of him, and they lent wings to his feet.

Sakuta knew he was stressing out about this quite a bit. And his stress levels got worse on the short ride to the next station.

But those feelings were no longer binding him. He got off the train, went out the gates, and, five minutes later, saw the hospital up ahead. His pace stayed steady.

The hospital loomed eight stories tall, and Sakuta walked right through the automatic doors.

Unsure where his mother was, he checked the floor map by reception. The psych ward was on the fifth floor, so he took the elevator there.

It was a little box with just him on it that made no other stops.

The doors opened, and he stepped out into a quiet corridor; almost no

sounds greeted him. The floor was carpeted, and it softened his footsteps.

He looked right and left.

The hall itself was a good thirty yards long, lined with identical doors. They had numbers on them, but no patient names.

Probably a sign of the times—privacy policies and the like. Or maybe that was how this type of ward operated to begin with.

He didn't know where his mom was.

But Sakuta didn't need to feel discouraged.

"Nobody can see me anyway, so I'll just go door-to-door."

No use worrying about propriety.

He decided to go for the door at the end of the corridor, but before he got a chance, a door three over opened.

"I'll call Dad and tell him what the doctor said," Kaede said as she came out.

She didn't see Sakuta. She just turned and headed for the elevator. Three yards before those, she turned right and entered a break room. Sakuta had checked it on his way and had seen a pay phone, so she was likely gonna call their dad on that.

And Kaede had let him know exactly where to go.

"Everyone should have a sister."

Sending her a silent thank-you, Sakuta moved to his mother's room.

He took a deep breath outside, feeling the tension mounting. His mouth felt dry. His legs shaky.

But he slid the door open, calm enough to make it quiet.

He stepped in and closed it behind him. Taking care not to make a sound.

His mother probably still couldn't see him and wouldn't hear it if he did make a sound. Maybe he didn't need to bother. But it seemed a natural gesture. Like his body just knew that's how you acted in a hospital.

It was a private room, for one. A single bed, with a small space left around it.

Light streamed in through a window, so it didn't feel confined. It didn't have that excessively sterile feel he associated with hospital rooms.

She didn't have many belongings here, but it felt like her.

The room had his mother's warmth.

She was sitting on the side of the bed, her feet on the floor.

She looked a bit tired.

"Too much excitement," she whispered.

She was probably talking about Kaede's visit. And it didn't sound like a regret. That tone was comfortably worn out.

"Oh, right," she said, reaching for the table. There was a tote bag on it, and she pulled a notebook out of it.

There was a table attached to the bed for food, and she opened the notebook on that. She read the words out loud as she wrote them down.

He'd worked out what he wanted to say on the way here.

Chosen the best turns of phrase.

Gone over and over them so that he wouldn't mess things up.

But now here she was, in front of him, and all his speeches were gone.

The words that emerged in their place came naturally.

"Mom, you've worked so hard."

Two years in this tiny room.

All on her own, struggling.

By saying it out loud, that became one big feeling inside Sakuta. An emotion laced with heat. One that sent a tingle past the back of his nose.

Just whispering that simple phrase made his voice shake, his voice already tinged with tears.

When he finished speaking, a big teardrop hit the floor. Tears falling from his eyes, pattering on the hospital's carpeting. Those points alone a darker shade.

“You’ve struggled so much.”

He’d known that. It was something...

He knew without thinking.

Her struggles had been real. There was no escaping them, and her heart had crumbled under their weight.

But Sakuta had been struggling too much to realize that. Even though—perhaps *because*—they were family, it was easy for emotions to fester.

To lose track of something this obvious.

He’d only just got it.

He’d spent two years trying not to think about her, but that wasn’t enough to make her not be his mom, and certainly not enough to make the memories of the time they’d lived together go away.

This wasn’t about logic.

Attacking reasons for it was absurd.

His body’s instinctive response told him so.

His mother was better. She’d worked through it and gotten better, and that made him glad. He’d finally figured that out.

And that was all there was to it.

Nothing else mattered.

They were family.

And that was what he’d really wanted to tell her.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said.

For hanging in there.

For getting better.

For being my mom.

For giving birth to me.

For bringing me up.

“Thank you.”

Everything he’d spent two years bottling up came pouring out. Tears and snot went everywhere.

He kept wiping them and blowing his nose, but there was no sign of this stopping. No sign of them drying up. No end to feeling like family.

There might be breaks from time to time, but family never went away. It’s always there, and always will be, and so you never notice just how much it matters.

Being away from her for two years had made that clear. How much he’d taken her for granted.

The lesson the dreaming girl had taught him applied here, too—he just hadn’t realized. But taking pleasure in the little joys is what true happiness is.

He’d no longer had his mother to rely on. He’d had to put her out of his mind and go on living. But Sakuta still had it in him to rejoice that she was getting better.

He still had feelings like that for her inside him.

The heat of his tears was fading.

His mother never saw him cry.

She still didn’t perceive him.

And he thought that was fine.

He could always come back.

Keep coming, until she noticed him.

Sakuta was no longer lost. No longer scared.

He’d visit, ten times, a hundred, a thousand, until the day came.

So right now...

“I’ll come again, Mom,” he said, and he turned away from the bed.

He reached for the door to leave.

And as he did, he thought he heard his name.

His mind was playing tricks. Giving him what he wanted to hear. It must be.

But he had to turn and look.

His body moved before his conscious thought.

“Mom...?” he said, his voice quivering.

She was looking his way. Her eyes locked on him.

“You came to visit,” she said, mustering a frail smile. Like she was feeling sorry.

And he didn’t want her to look like that, so he simply said, “Yep.”

And he forced a smile.

“No school?”

“We’re basically on spring break.”

His face was stained with tears, and he rubbed them with his sleeve.

“Don’t go playing hooky.”

“I totally did.”

“But I’m glad.”

“Mm?”

“It’s been too long since I saw you.”

“Mom...”

Sakuta took a step away from the door, back into the room.

As he reached the bed, his mother took his hands. Hands that had seemed so big when he was younger. But now his hands were larger than hers. He hadn’t held her hands since grade school and had never realized that. He’d always assumed they were still bigger. That she was larger than him. He’d been taller than her for a while, but he only ever wanted her looking after him.

And that wasn’t right. He was also someone who could be relied upon.

Like Mai said, he was a lot more grown-up now.

And that was one way to be mom and son. To be family.

“Thank you, Sakuta.”

“I’m happy to come visit anytime.”

“Thank you for Kaede.”

“.....”

He’d meant to nod. He just couldn’t. If he did anything right now, the waterworks would start again.

“I’m glad you’re her brother.”

“.....”

His eyes were burning up.

“I’m sorry we put this all on you.”

“.....”

Trying to fight it off, he shook his head.

“I love you, Sakuta.”

But when he heard that, there was no resisting.

He’d known how she felt.

He just felt like he couldn’t trust that anymore. Because she’d no longer been there with him.

And all those knotted feelings melted away in the heat of his tears.

Through blurred vision, he could see her crying, too.

“Mm...mm...,” she said, again and again.

Sakuta knew what she meant. Because they were family.

They were still crying when Kaede got back. Kaede probably had no clue what Sakuta was doing here. But before he knew it, she was crying with them. And crying together that day made them a family once more.

Spring made the cherry trees bloom.

The seasons kept on changing.

Tears couldn't keep summer away.

Laughter couldn't keep fall away.

Studying couldn't keep winter away.

No more Adolescence Syndrome.

His or anyone else's.

He felt like it was all over.

But nothing was.

The seasons kept on changing.

Spring, summer, fall, and winter came and went.

And a new spring arrived.



A New season

The entrance ceremony ended, and he left the venue to find cherry blossoms floating in the spring breeze.

“Whew, it’s finally over.”

He tried to stretch, but the shoulders of his suit were too tight, and he couldn’t raise his arms properly.

But Sakuta’s heart was dancing. It felt free, like never before.

He was finally in college.

His last year of high school had been spent cooped up and studying...

Study guides on the train to school, English vocab drills on breaks, paying full attention in classes, and reviewing it all on the train home. He’d even studied during breaks at work.

Occasionally, Mai would give him a pop quiz and reward him if he passed. Even if he failed, he’d get a nice smile. Although that was a bit unnerving, if he was being honest.

Near the end of the year, his practice exam results had been disappointing, and she’d quit talking to him. That was rough. To get back in her good graces, he’d had to turn to Nodoka for help studying—she was applying to the same college they were.

He’d done everything he could, and it had finally paid off.

Now it was time for his college entrance ceremony.

Sakuta felt like he was finally and truly free of exams.

Nodoka had sat the exams with him, and she passed, too. Different department, though. She must’ve been here somewhere, but he didn’t know where she was sitting. And she’d decided showing up blond would be a bit much, so when they’d met up outside their Fujisawa apartments, her dazzling gold had been dyed jet-black.

“Who the—?” had been Sakuta’s honest reaction.

She usually kept her hair bunched on one side, but she’d let it down and was genuinely unrecognizable.

“It’s me, asshole.”

The two of them were attending a city-run college in Yokohama. The mayor had attended the ceremony and made a speech. Sakuta had already forgotten every word of it, but he was sure it had been very impressive.

“Never gonna find her like this,” he muttered.

He *was* looking for Nodoka, but the ceremony was in the main gymnasium and filled with freshmen in similar-looking suits. Without the blond locks, he had no way of locating her.

That did not improve on the main street through the campus.

All the way to the main gates, the road was packed with new students in uncomfortable suits and upperclassmen already recruiting for clubs or teams. There were signs and flyers everywhere. People dressed up to draw the eye, even several mascot costumes. Quite festive.

“Very college.”

It *was* a college, so that was entirely accurate. But it wasn’t often real life was this close a match to your mental image.

And that really made him feel like a college student.

He pushed through that typical college hubbub and headed toward the gates. If he waited there, he’d likely spot Nodoka eventually.

It wouldn’t be a huge deal if he just left alone, but she’d said, “My sister asked me to grab a photo,” so he figured he shouldn’t actually leave the grounds.

But as he drew near the gate, he spotted something and stopped in his tracks.

Someone who seemed out of place here. Too small to be a college student.

And not his imagination.

He saw that red leather knapsack. She was skipping along, slipping through the forest of college kids. Her beautiful black hair flouncing, she ran right past Sakuta.

He never got a clear look at her, but he felt sure it was the same kid. The girl who looked like child-actress Mai. The vision his Adolescence Syndrome had

shown him. Or at least the kid he'd *thought* was a vision.

"Uh..."

He turned to call after her.

But the knapsack kid was nowhere to be found. He'd lost her already.

But instead, someone called his name.

".....?"

Blinking, he scanned the crowd.

"...Azusagawa."

The voice was clearer this time. Definitely his name. It sounded kinda familiar, but not enough that he could place the speaker.

"You are Azusagawa, right?"

He found the speaker in front of him. A girl in a navy pantsuit. Which meant she must've been a freshmen, too. A newly anointed college girl.

"....."

Her eyes were looking right at him through thin-framed glasses. When he didn't say anything, she started to look worried.

But he did know this girl.

He'd forgotten her once, but events last year had brought her to his attention again. Given the nature of those events, it took him a second to respond. Eventually, he managed to speak.

"Akagi?"

That was her name.

Ikumi Akagi.

"Yeah. Been a while," she said.

Her expression never changed.

That day, Sakuta Azusagawa was reunited with a junior high school classmate.

Afterword

The anime's airing.

Please check out Sakuta and Mai in motion, fully voiced.

The manga versions of *Bunny Girl Senpai* and *Petite Devil Kohai* are on sale.

Bunny Girl is drawn by Tsugumi Nanamiya, and *Petite Devil* by Tsukumo Asakusa, and their work is gorgeous. So many drawings of Mai being adorable and Tomoe pouting.

There are lots of plans for other merchandise afoot, so don't take your eyes off the *Rascal* world.

To my illustrator, Keji Mizoguchi, and my editors Kurokawa, Kurosaki, and Fujiwara, you've been invaluable.

And a final hearty cheer to the readers who've stuck with me. I hope we meet again in the next volume. The college arc is starting soon! Probably.

Hajime Kamoshida

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